



# Getting Real

Young Women and Girls, Working  
Futures, VET and VET in Schools

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**Getting Real: Young Women and girls, Working Futures, VET and VET in Schools**

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## Section 1. Executive Summary



## Executive Summary

Elaine Butler, Robyn Woolley

### Introduction

*“Getting Real? Young Women and Girls, Working Futures, VET and VET in Schools”* is the report of research commissioned in 2004 by Security4Women (S4W), one of four National Women’s Secretariats funded through the Australian Government Office for Women (OFW).

In 2003, S4W surveyed over 3000 women around Australia, to ascertain a representative view of women’s priorities concerning their lifelong economic well-being, despite the many differences inherent in the category ‘women’. Women, irrespective of age, education backgrounds and socio-economic status, were remarkably consistent in their choices, identifying the following as five areas of highest priority: work arrangements to help balance family and other responsibilities; affordable education and training for all ages; equal representation in management and leadership; equality of male and female wages and salaries; and education about financial and economic issues (Doughney J. et al/S4W, 2004).

After consideration of existing and contemporary research activities in these five areas, and the inter-related nature of work-related or vocational education and training (VET) with the above identified issues, it was decided that in 2004/5 S4W would invest in research into affordable work-related education and training for women of all ages.

The aim of this research is to enable S4W to propose policy development based on the outcomes of this research to enhance greater economic equity for women and to define measures to advocate and lobby for policy and legislative amendments on behalf of the women’s sector.

*Women in Adult and Vocational Education Inc [WAVE]* was commissioned to undertake research for S4W. The interest in girls and young women in the Vocational Education and Training [VET] sector stems from a broader commitment to examine the position of women in Australia within Lifelong Learning, a global policy priority adopted and promoted by the OECD and European Union.

*“Getting Real ...”* is the first stage of this broad research agenda with a framing focus of life-long learning: work related education and training for women, designed to provide ‘snapshots’ of different groups of women within the area of work related learning and VET - girls and young women; indigenous women; women retraining or returning to work; women in micro and small business, and women from low socio-economic backgrounds.

*“Getting Real...”* reports on an investigation into the position of girls and young women, in the later stages of senior secondary schooling in three states, South Australia, New South Wales and Queensland, as they prepare to finish compulsory schooling and enter the world of paid work.

In the past 3-5 years, there has been an increasing emphasis on the vocationalisation of education, especially at senior secondary school level. This emphasis has been accompanied by the development and funding of (federal and state) policies with a specific focus on VET in Schools (VIS) and similar (VET in TAFE (TVET) VET delivered by TAFE, work experience, schools becoming registered Training Organisations (RTOs), traineeships from year 10 level and so on).

Policies and programs have been delivered rapidly, especially at state levels, many without input from the benefit of in-depth knowledge of the VET system, including issues and policy development related to equity. For example, it is unclear whether data being collected is gender disaggregated, as a matter of course. There is now widespread concern that historical gendered patterns may be repeating themselves in the provision of such programs, with the potential to disadvantage young women in terms of career aspirations and long-term economic security, given the ad hoc nature of early choices relating to VIS/TVET.

## Executive Summary

### The project

Young Women and Girls: Working Futures, VET and VET in Schools.

### Locations

Three states viz. NSW, Qld. and S.A.

### Aims of research

The segmentation of women's and girls' fields of study and workplace participation remains a concern due to the resulting pay differential that is well documented. While girls' participation in VET courses while at school [VET in Schools] is high it is considered that they may be over-represented in 'feminised' course areas such as child studies, beauty and hairdressing, hospitality and business administration areas.

There is a dearth of research into young women's work aspirations, especially as they relate to VET and any VIS/TVET/VET experiences they may have. Similarly, there is a lack of relevant policy or guidelines for VIS educators in this area.

Research is needed to provide primary data; to ascertain the basis of the career and VET selections made by girls and young women, and whether they feel such educational choices and selection applies or 'fits' in with their future aspirations.

Has their VET [in Schools] and/or early post school experience been a positive learning experience and one that they anticipate they will return to? What are the trends? The issues? The possibilities?

### Objectives

- to identify how girls think and talk about their work aspirations;
- to identify the complex set of factors leading to subject and occupation/industry related choices by girls who participate in VET in Schools
- to identify if workplace application/'fit' of their chosen subject is a motivator for the VET in Schools course selection
- to investigate whether the learning experience is in fact a positive educational experience which would lead them to consider VET educational pathways post school

### Proposed Outcome/s

Report on the case study to:

- provide a critical literature review re young women, VET and work, covering senior secondary school and school leavers;
- indicate directions for equity related policy for VIS/TVET, with a focus on young women.
- contribute data to 2004/5 large scale research, as proposed.

S4W will build on this platform to:

- raise community and government awareness about these factors, and advise in the development of government programmes,
- contribute to national policy reform agendas relevant to economic well-being for women
- enhance and improve results for women where need is indicated through consultation with other relevant bodies, organisations and departments

### Methodology

Broad critical literature review - international and national; interviews, questionnaire and targeted focus groups

### Key Questions

- How do young women talk about their future work aspirations, careers and working lives?
- Where do they get information from? How/do they plan?
- How/do young women see education and training linking to their life plans and future work?
- What are their aspirations and experiences?
- How can VET policies, and provision best support young women in their selection of career paths, access to and engagement in work-related learning, including especially vocational education and training?



## Executive Summary

### Overview

The growth of vocational education in schools has been rapid, including the delivery of vocational education in schools, by schools or TAFE or by private providers. During this process it has been observed, anecdotally and in a very few studies available, that the gendered pattern of course selection, and/or field of study is being repeated with school students' choices mirroring those patterns well entrenched in the wider VET system and Australian working lives. The results of labour market gender segregation have been of little benefit to women and are of particular relevance to a study examining linkages between education, work and economic security.

Dwyer & Wyn [2001] are amongst those researchers who warn of the gender blind approach currently informing VET in schools and school to work transitions. In addition a recently published report [Long & DSF 2004] looking into the lives of Australia's young people found that female school leavers continue to face greater disadvantage than males during this period of transition from school to work, with an increasing number of girls not in school, or work. This points to differing outcomes from education based on gender, which can have serious life consequences.

This concern is not new and is supported by numerous earlier reports identifying the gendered constructions of cultural, social and domestic barriers to equality of access and outcomes. Collins *et al* [2000] documented how actions can impact differently on different boys and girls because of gendered constructions, in their investigation into gendered behaviours in schools. Here young women's career choices and priorities were identified as being an important area for further examination and research [Collins *et al*, 1996:95]. And again, concern over career choices and also concern regarding the transition period from school to training or work were each described as 'a critical juncture for girls and young women' [Quay Connection, 2003:53].

The state-based case studies conducted in South Australia, New South Wales and Queensland explored future work aspirations, information patterns of career guidance, and the linkages girls are making with training and life plans.

### The Findings

The following sections draw on and highlight findings documented in various sections of this Report.

#### Literature review

The wide-ranging literature review, in its consideration of international and Australian publications, found disturbingly little within the literature to suggest that opportunities and outcomes in relation to working futures and VET will improve for girls and young women in the near future.

This review identified, within the literature, a number of major characteristics:

- a narrow research and policy agenda set within the current economically-driven climate of vocationalism in education, which prevails in Australia and internationally
- continued growth of VET in Schools and transition-to-work programmes
- a gender-neutral or gender-blind approach has subsumed the strong focus on girls' career and vocational needs, evident in the literature of the previous decade
- major funded research operates within a masculinist VET framework

From these major findings, a number of relevant topics were identified, of which four were discussed further

1. entrenched gendered social conditioning that affects the ways girls and young women approach their future career and life choices
2. the current situation for women already in the workplace, that is far from satisfactory, and which young girls are being expected to perpetuate
3. the narrow research base informing VET and VET in schools, that promotes the current gender-blind focus and masculinist framework of vocational training
4. a political trend with potential to diminish rather than enhance the role of women and steer women and girls into traditional roles

The review concludes that discussion of these issues in the literature provides only a partial and simplistic critique of the current situation for girls.

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This review found that research agendas in the area of VET in schools and transitions to work carry (in large part) assumptions that girls' gendered issues have been dealt with. The focal areas have shifted, leaving girls and young women very much out of focus. This 'clouding' of girls' issues within research has been documented, however, with some literature indicating that, for girls and young women, both the current models of transition education and school-linked VET, and the framework of paid work into which they expect and are expected to move, limit opportunities and operate to disadvantage them.

The particular ways in which these factors continue to operate disadvantageously are not being adequately researched. Despite the emergence of recent studies which clearly identify the gendered nature of girls' and young women's VET-related disadvantages and their implications, gender-blind policy continues to drive the agenda of research into VET, VET in Schools and education and training pathways.

The Literature Review recommends that there is an urgent need for broad-based and independent research that investigates the factors that impact on girls' vocational futures, from the perspective of the participants: it is what young women experience, and what they identify as their concerns, needs and aspirations, that must be investigated and used to inform appropriate policies and strategies for girls, young women and VET.

### The Interviews

#### Overview of findings

- What girls like and what interests them are strong motivators in their course and vocational selection.
- VET subjects provide an additional opportunity to school organised work experience to learn about work.
- The majority of the girls are still choosing traditional (feminised) courses and career paths into the workplace.
- Nearly all the girls told us they felt familiar with the type of work involved in their career choice, but then demonstrated they did not know about job availability or pay rates, or how these factors impact on their career choices or outcomes.
- School based Careers Advisors are seen as a major source of information about courses and careers.

- Family and friends rate as a significant influence in career decisions.
- The majority of girls felt they were already on a career track - the vast majority stated they planned to do more study in the career area of their choice - demonstrating a high relevance of education for work
- The majority of the students were in VET courses of their choice and had a high level of satisfaction with VET
- Participants overwhelmingly perceived the skills and knowledge from VET as useful for their futures - either as a career or for everyday life

#### Working futures: early career choices

The young women tended to base their career decisions on what they enjoy and what they are good at.

In the main, girls' career choices seem unconnected to employment trends and job availability, and are based on personal preferences without supporting information on the sustainability of this choice.

While the young women surveyed had strong ideas of what career they wanted, overwhelmingly, the majority of girls had identified future careers in traditionally 'female' occupations. Girls are continuing to select traditional/feminised areas of work where they are at risk of high rates of casualisation and low rates of pay.

The data indicate that young women think less about economic security when making decisions about their careers and more about a preferred occupation.

While most students tended to have a strong idea of the nature of the work involved in their chosen career, most had no relevant information on job availability or rates of pay in their selected VET area.

Many girls participating in VET while at school are electing industry areas where they are at risk of low remuneration through these areas being so-called traditional areas of work for women. This knowledge is highly relevant to young women and may in fact assist them to assess if a potential career route can provide them with the future lifestyle they want - or can afford.

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Moving from the individual, this factor has long-term considerations due to the disproportionate burden of casualisation borne by Australian women. The traditional female orientation of their work experience and future career aspirations gives support to the finding noted in the literature review that *entrenched social conditioning that affects the way girls and young women approach their future career and life choices*. It also gives weight to the view that *'current political agenda...attempts to steer women and girls into traditional institutionalised role*.

### Access to Information

- Students' main source of information about the type of work involved in their career of choice was their school. This was augmented by family, friends, and employers.
- Career information appears to fall short and leave invisible the differing labour market experiences of Australian women and girls.
- Students want more information about how to succeed in their chosen career, and about how to apply their VET course to maximise outcomes for their future

If the information and guidance they receive at school about work, part time work placement, VET subject choice and careers, is neither accurate nor broad enough to encourage students to think 'out of the box' for their career aspirations, then *the gender blind focus* - and the resultant disadvantage identified in the literature review - will continue.

This has enormous implications for the quality and integrity of information, advice and guidance provided at school, and for the professional development and support necessary for staff to enable them to 'make a difference' to the lives and aspirations of young women studying VET

Of utmost relevance is the lack of information on job availability and pay rates of the girls' chosen industry areas. There was little demonstration that the girls received any guidance of how (or if) the industry area of personal interest would or could provide economic security. There was no evidence of any understandings of the implications of gender in relation to field of study or work force patterns and what this would mean to them as individuals.

Connections were not made as to whether pursuing areas of personal interest would provide them with a job, or what the conditions of that job would be like. Moreover, there is no evidence of proactive use of employment forecasts or job growth data to inform girls' choices. As the girls are demonstrating they perceive themselves to be on a career path, there appears to be widespread failure to support these girls by ensuring their choices are fully informed, as they move towards independent futures.

### Experiences of VET in schools

- Overall, students were highly positive about work experience programs, VET and its relevance; that the knowledge and skills gained from VET would be useful at some time in the future.
- The girls in this study demonstrated considerable confidence and positivity in linking their VET experiences to their future work and study plans. This strength is also displayed in their satisfaction with following study and career routes based on enjoyment and utilising 'what they like' as a strong motivator.
- Girls were most often in the course area of their choice, with only some exceptions.
- Work experience followed similar choice patterns to courses, with personal interest being the main influence for the majority, while some girls were influenced by family and friends.
- Work experience, like the girls' own casual employment experiences, provide opportunities to learn skills specific to the job, to learn about the workplace generally and about skills required in working with others.

The high level of satisfaction with engagement in VET learning experiences is both pleasing and of considerable importance, as is the finding that the participants perceive their VET experience will be of value to their futures. Comments also indicate that some girls can see skills transferability from both work experience, their own casual employment, school study and VET study for future study and work application.

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### Aspirations

- Overall, students felt positively about their futures.
- Many of students intend to do further study, mostly through VET or, for some, at university.
- The majority of students had a positive view of work experience, learning skills specific to industry and gaining a greater understanding of what it is like to be in the workforce.

In recent times, gender-related policy initiatives tend to focus on ‘masculinity’ - boys and men. This is especially so in education. However, VET has long been recognised for its masculinised history and practices (Butler and Ferrier, 2000). It is imperative that policies and practices to enhance the positioning of and so outcomes for girls and young women in their engagement with vocational learning and work experience programs be put in place as a matter of urgency given the ongoing rapid growth of VET in schools.

Such initiatives, supported by further in-depth gender-sensitive research are necessary to redress persistent reproduction of poor labour market outcomes for girls and women.

### In summary

The above findings have much in common with the international research that does focus on girls, and their experiences of vocational education and training, work, and work-related aspirations. For example, the motivation for pursuing careers is similar to that identified in Canadian research (e.g. Fenwick, 2004), as is a recognition by young women in the twenty first century, that they will continue to carry most of the responsibilities related to home and family (e.g. Pocock, 2003).

The high potential for the existing global and national/local gendered inequalities to be perpetuated through the choices and ‘pathways’ that the majority of the girls are selecting is also of high concern. This trend will not enhance opportunities for the economic well-being for such girls. Whether these young women continue studies through VET, in workplaces or as students, or if they continue on to university study, seemingly entrenched gendered patterns of selection are being repeated - as ever (e.g. Jackson 2004).

This brings us to ask the question, posed in similar circumstances about similar cohorts and issues in Canada, by Fenwick:

The important question here is, how is it that girls can enjoy higher overall educational achievement but have significantly lower economic achievement than boys? What happens or doesn’t happen in girls’ career and vocational education to address this disparity? (2004, p178)

Our research findings, précised above, go a long way to answer the latter query.

We argue that appropriate complementary national and state/local policy initiatives and resources to investigate and support girls and young women in their engagement with VET in schools and ensuing career paths is a matter of high priority.

Similarly, the collection of gender disaggregated national and state data for VET in schools programs and associated activities is a necessity.

Such initiatives must engage with the realities and future projections of young women’s lives, within the socio-cultural, economic and political contexts that shape their lives. These gender-sensitive initiatives are required from national policy level, to state based policies, data collection, implementation, monitoring and ongoing evaluation of relevant VET programs for girls and young women.

Further, along with the data collection to support such studies, longitudinal studies to track and link the pathways of girls and women from school through pathways studies and on into their labour market outcomes are essential.

At school and local levels, gender sensitive labour market training and further professional development are of central importance for all educators or counsellors involved in career (and subject selection) advice, work experience placements for girls, and/or the development and offering of vocational courses in schools. This extends to industry and employer representatives, given their increasing involvement in VET in schools and work experience programs.

In-service training is a priority for those who give career advice and must include relevant workplace information.

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Moreover, it is essential that in the framing of such initiatives, critical cognisance of historical global/local gendered inequalities that continue to be reproduced must be addressed.

This is doubly important, given the push for girls and young women to make choices around occupations and careers at ever earlier ages without the understanding the implications of such choices in relation to their future economic well-being.

Little change has occurred over recent years to broaden girls' career choices despite the opportunities to learn about work that VET provides. VET offers a viable study pathway through school to work for girls and young women, as it does for young men, and so needs to be promoted as a vital and relevant alternative to university. However, the gender neutral delivery of mainstream VET has missed an opportunity to inform girls and young women of the pitfalls ahead that have long term structural roots in the workplace and implications on their lives and economic standing. Gender specific policy and career education is essential to guide VET in School delivery.

From a Canadian perspective, Fenwick (2004, p 169) posits four directions for change, for girls:

- more gender sensitive career education for girls;
- sponsored vocational education for women;
- management education in gendered issues arising in the changing economy;
- and critical vocational education in both schools and workplaces.

We support similar initiatives for development and implementation in Australia. This is especially important, given the move to re-prioritise skills shortages in the traditional masculinised trade areas, along with the establishment of a new brand of Technical Colleges and the lack of success in either attracting or retaining a critical mass of girls or young women to such trade areas over the last two decades.

This research project, although described as small-scale, resonates strongly with issues that are much wider, for the economic well-being of young women. It is now urgent that wider and deeper gender-sensitive research be conducted in this area. It is time that girls and young women are freed from the jail of 'generic youth'.

We argue that girls and young women should be active recipients of policy making and implementation that support them. Rather than being the recipients of policy and practices that position young women in scenarios of contradictions and ambivalence relating to their vocational futures, VET in Schools must assist them in their ambitions to 'get real', ensuring that the choices made by girls and young women are fully informed choices. Implicit in this statement is the requirement that the VET system also needs to 'gets real' - girls and women comprise over half of its constituency.

What is needed are policies and practices that support girls and young women to fulfill their dreams, rather than setting them unknowingly on pathways that may well compromise their future economic well being.

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## Section 2. Introduction



## Introduction

Elaine Butler

*The opportunity to make a better life is enshrined in democratic societies. It is one of the few constants in the maelstrom of technological, economic and social change. Virtually everyone believes in it. Such ideas have pushed education to the centre-stage of social and economic policy agenda. Within the OECD, widening access, raising standard and further investment in education are believed to deliver opportunity, prosperity and justice. The growing importance attached to educational credentials symbolizes a tightening bond between education, jobs and rewards. We are told that 'the more we learn the more we earn'. Credentials are the currency of opportunity. (Brown, 2003, p3)*

*Finishing school isn't just about the studying, it's about learning and experiences in whatever you want, to fulfill a dream. VET can help you do that. South Australian participant (Mapedzahama, V., South Australian Report 2005. Appendix 1)*

*Initial engagement with the VET system - whether at school, or in entry level VET- is a critical juncture for girls and young women. The issues ... to address include barriers to considering VET as a viable option, together with the occupational segregation that occurs once girls and young women engage with VET. (Quay Connection, 2003, p.53.)*

In Australia, as in other industrialised countries, vocational learning for 'youth' has emerged as a complex contemporary policy issue of high significance. This is especially so for 'youth' in 'transition' - a term utilised to capture and indeed influence the movements of young people from compulsory education to 'the world of work', and, it is hoped, post-compulsory education including lifelong education. It is here in this contested space that boundaries between education sectors, and the institutional divides of employment and education are blurring and evolving.

Perhaps more importantly this is also a significant period in the formation of young people's subjectivities, and their life chances. The 'choices' made by and for young persons at this time are inter-related with the quality and quantity of opportunities available to them. In turn, such opportunities and so choices are shaped by aspects such as geographical location, gender, race, socio-economic status, family histories, educational attainment and aspirations (e.g. ref Beavis et al, 2004; Dwyer & Wynn, 2001).

The movement to link vocational learning with compulsory education as a (funded and policy driven) 'pathway' to employability and employment for young people continues to grow at unprecedented rates. There is an ever-increasing plethora of policies and research in this rapidly evolving area (e.g. ACER, 2002; Bagnall, 2003; DSF, 2002; Fenwick, 2004; Karmel, 2004a & b; Long & DSDF, 2004; NCVER, 2004; OECD, 1999a & b; Teese and Polesel, 2003; Queensland Govt., 2002; Working Group, 2004).

Within this field, a generic concept of 'youth' collapses the perceived life/education/work experiences and needs of the diverse range of young people into the one category, most often regardless of differentiating factors mentioned above, and including that of gender. Above all, and as illustrated in the Literature Review, there is a dearth of work that focuses on experiences and needs of girls and young women, especially within their socio-cultural, economic and political contexts. Indeed, where potential issues relating to girls, their working futures and vocational learning have been identified and mentioned (albeit in passing and then only briefly), most often this mention is 'one-off' with no follow-up recommendations (e.g. House of Representatives, 2004; Working Group, 2004, p. 83).

### The 'girls' project

The intent of this small-scale research project is to provide 'snapshots' of the perceptions of girls and young women in three states (New South Wales, Queensland and South Australia) engaged in Vocational Education and Training (VET) activities, as part of their school-based activities as they approach transition from school to work and/or further study. The information gathered from over 300 girls who participated in the project will be analysed for trends and issues within each location as well as across the samples. In turn, literature, including an extensive critical literature review that is an integral part of the project, will be utilised to interrogate the findings, and so make suggestions for policy, further research and for practice in the arena of vocational learning in schools, with a focus on girls and young women.

## Introduction

The naming of the report took some time. In settling for “Getting real?...” it is our intent that this report will demonstrate tensions inherent in the data, viz: -

- the enthusiasm of the young women involved to engage in work that is ‘fun’, that ‘they enjoy’ and ‘are good at’, and their desire to establish careers in selected (mostly highly feminised) areas;
- the pivotal significance of VET introductory learning experiences made available through VET in Schools (VIS); and
- that, given the pattern of career ‘choices’, the positioning of the girls and young women for future career paths and so economic security is indeed highly problematic in labour market terms.

### Toward some definitions

This project is located within a broader exploration of lifelong learning for girls and women. As argued by Jackson (2003), “the concept of lifelong learning is broad and often ill defined. ...lifelong learning includes learning in educational institutions, in the workplace, in the home, and in the community and voluntary organisations.” Further, and drawing on the work of John Field, she reminds us that ‘...lifelong learning is a way of thinking about and structuring society’s approach to education.’ (2003, p.366)

Now part of everyday discourse, the (global) concept of lifelong learning, although promising much to individuals and nations, as they are further immersed in ‘knowledge societies’ and ‘knowledge economies’, masks inherent risks (e.g. ref Brown, 2003). Importantly for this project, Jackson reminds us that often the meta-discourse of lifelong learning ‘...is one that favours individualism and instrumentalism, embedded in the structures and organisations that are themselves gendered, raced and classed. (2003, p.366) Given this,

*...far removed from a dream of opportunities for all, a learning society that is ‘grafted on’ can only replicate the structural inequalities of gender, class and other differences, where only certain types of knowledge, skills and work are valued.’ (p. 367)*

The Australian approach to lifelong learning favours a focus on adults, and especially on connections with the employability and paid work. As advised by Karmel (2004b, p. 3), ‘(t)his is consistent with the general flavour of policy de-

bates in Australia-most interest has centred on maintaining engagement with the labour market.’

Vocational education and training (VET) is an inherent part of the global/local lifelong learning agenda. We agree with Bagnall (2003, p. 4) that ‘...there is no general, universal, or given definition or conceptualisation of VET’. The understanding adopted for this project is that explained by Bagnall: -

*(b)y the term Vocational Education and Training, is meant learning engagements that are directed primarily to enhancing the economic potential of individual learners. ...Economic potential includes employment potential - the potential to obtain paid employment or better paid employment than that which the learner currently has. (2003, p. 4)*

Initially VET was introduced into schools to diversify the curriculum to cater for a broader range of students especially at senior secondary level, as retention rates in Years 11 and 12 rose in the 1980s and peaked in the early 1990s (ACER 2002, p. 1). More recent focus is now on attracting the same year level students to stay at school, rather than leave ‘early’. However, the prime aim of VET policy, and especially of VET in schools, in which ever format it is delivered and/or experienced, is to increase employability of students; to provide ‘... clear and recognised pathways to employment and further education and training’ ...’ to foster closer links between school and work’. (ACER 2002, p. 2)

This sentiment is also obvious in UK policy: - ...vocational learning is not just a matter of contributing skills to the economy, nor of providing opportunities to young people who find difficulty with academic subjects - though it can do both of these things. Soundly-based vocational education is an absolutely key feature in the education project itself as it is capable of attracting large numbers of young people to participate in, and attain at, advanced level study. (Working Group, 2004, p. 77)



## Introduction

### Why girls and young women?

The above question centers age-old issues that cut across all categories of difference within the 'catch-all' phrase of 'women and girls', relating to the importance of education, training, and access to well paid work and satisfying careers for women, and in turn for their daughters. Three main areas have been named as central requirements for urgent attention for women globally: empowerment of women, economic and financial resources, and education (e.g. Symington and Sprenger, 2004; Leeson, 2004). This resonates with and is mirrored in results of the national research conducted by *Security4Women* in Australia in 2003-4, that provided the impetus for this research. Leeson reporting on results of a wide reaching global research project advises that

*(r)espondents listed education over all others as the best strategy for the future of global equality. Education as a strategy shifts the focus from a matter of access to schools into a matter of content that students will be taught. (2004, p. 205)*

The close linking between vocational education and work becomes doubly significant for girls and women. As advised by Stroobants (2005, p. 49), the 'meaning and place of work in women's lives is not steady'. Rather it is always mobile, being (re)negotiated, along with women's '(re)construction of their self in relation to society' and the ever shifting discursive expectations of (paid and unpaid) work/life/family/self. As commented above, school-based vocational experiences coincide with time of intense identity work for young people. Along with this, they are exposed to ever more information about their working futures, through multiple media channels, of which schools are one (albeit significant as we shall see).

As reported in a South Australian daily paper, in a (CAREERYOU) section 'Working it out', 'the challenge is not in acquiring knowledge but in making sense of it through critical thinking' Employers now expect staff to take care of their own careers' (McEwen and Dakin, 2004, p. 33). Given this, it becomes imperative that girls and young women have access to critical information about work, including the (gendered) nature and dynamics of the labour market, and so how to craft and pursue career pathways that will fulfill them both personally, and stand them in good stead in terms of economic well-being, both in the long term as well as meeting short term interests and desires.

That Australia has one of the most gender-segregated labour forces of all OECD countries is a well-known fact (Butler & Ferrier, 2000). Similarly, that globally, women are comparatively disadvantaged in labour markets, is beyond argument. 'Indeed, familiar issues of women, work and learning are exacerbated in the changing contexts and designs of work comprising the so-called New Economy (Fenwick 2004, p. 169).

Despite the intransigence of these patterns of global/local inequality, it would appear that issues relating to girls and women have all but disappeared from political/policy agendas, in education as elsewhere. As reported by Symington and Sprenger:

*...(w)e are losing ground. Despite all of the work we have done and progress we have made, women as a category and as individuals continue to be devalued, discriminated against and abused. We find ourselves in a position of sliding back and having to defend the gains we have made, even re-fighting battles previously won. So while there is increasing recognition that 'another world is possible', much of our energy is taken up by responding to developments and other people's agendas, either in reacting to their impact on women's rights or in lobbying to ensure that women's rights issues are included. (2004, p. 3)*

In Australia, as elsewhere, the dominant gender issue is that of 'what about the boys (and men)?' Masculinity, we are persuaded to believe, is in crisis. This discourse is evident in most Anglophone countries, as is the significant positioning of masculinity on social policy agendas, especially but not exclusively the policy agendas of education. As Scourfield and Drakeford (2001, p. 3) note that '(t)he fact that the topic of masculinity seems to be considered 'good copy' in much of the media, and not just in the intellectual press, is an indication of its currency and accessibility'. They go further, questioning 'why these masculinist policies, now?', demonstrating that this policy approach is one 'of creeping compulsion in support of this essentially ideological position'. Such an approach, they argue, both denies the complexities of men's (and women's) lives and to date have failed to deliver any substantial outcomes in the U.K. (2001, pp. 6-7).

## Introduction

Although these comments are also supported by Australian research (e.g. Collins *et al*, 2000; Dwyer and Wyn, 2001; Long and DSF, 2004; Teese and Polesel, 2003), masculinist policies are centre stage in Australian education, to the detriment of interest in girls and women. This is especially the case when comparing girls' retention rates at school and entry into university, without considering the gendered nature of employment outcomes, as well as the gendered reasons for girls staying longer at school (e.g. see Alloway and Gilbert, 2004; Teese and Polesel, 2003; Quay Connection, 2003). Moreover, these factors are ignored by those interpreting VET statistics, without further disaggregation of data or linking patterns of enrolment with labour market implications. The following is an example of one such statement: -

*...[VET] participation rates are higher for males than for females, no doubt reflecting the importance of trade training for young men. It should be noted that VET is the only sector where young men outnumber young women - school retention is higher for girls and women outnumber men at university [Karmel 2004a, p. 1]*

As argued by Teese and Polesel in this lengthy but significant quotation:

*...(d)declining morale linked to declining achievement is not confined to boys. While much has been made of the relative disadvantages of boys, it is too little appreciated that girls often continue at school with low morale and limited interest in school work. That they do continue at school more often than boys gives a misleading impression of the quality of their experience. Low achievement undermines their satisfaction with school just as much as surely as amongst boys. The majority of low-achieving girls would rather be at work than at school and a considerable minority also see themselves as prisoners. If they are less likely than boys to intend to quit school and enter vocational education and training, it is also quite true that they have far fewer opportunities for employment-based training through craft apprenticeships. Girls are more economically confined to school than boys, even though they are less likely at every level of achievement to see themselves confined in gaol. (2003, p. 138-9)*

In this project, we take up the challenge issued by Alloway and Gilbert (2004, p. 109) that '...equity stories involving ...young women have been muted and backgrounded in the process of amplifying and foregrounding concern about male enrolments'. By foregrounding data collected specifically collected from girls and young women, we seek to redress this relative silencing, albeit in a small way. We also aim to provide a window into some experiences and issues of Australian girls and young women, in relation to their thoughts about their working futures, and their early engagement with VET.

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## Section 3. Methodology



## Methodology

Virginia Mappedzahama

This report is based on the questionnaire responses from girls enrolled in a VET course in schools or a TAFE Institute in South Australia, New South Wales and Queensland. It presents an analysis of the girls' perceptions of VET, its relevance to their future goals, their perceptions of structured work experience programs, and also how the girls talk about their future careers.

The data is important in that it gives us an insight into the perceptions and concerns of young girls in relation to VET and its relevance to their futures needs. Due to the relatively small sample size of 292 completed questionnaires it might not be possible to generalize the findings of this research to all girls involved in VET. Additionally small geographic pockets or areas participated by invitation, albeit within 3 states. It can nevertheless, contribute information to guide policy formation that is gender-specific and relevant to the needs and experiences of young girls.

### Questionnaire Design (See Appendix D)

Data for the research was gathered primarily by use of self completion questionnaires. The questionnaire was designed by a group of researchers involved in the present research in South Australia, New South Wales and Queensland to capture data that would address the project questions as outlined in the research overview by WAVE. It was divided into 4 sections designed primarily to explore how young girls see VET linking to their life plans and future work, how they think and speak of those future careers and how they came to make those decisions in relation to VET.

A combination of open ended and fixed-alternative question format was used in the design of the questionnaire. Fixed alternative questions were used primarily for their ability to achieve greater uniformity of measurement and therefore greater reliability; "of making the respondents answer in a manner fitting to the response category" (Cohen and Manion, 1996 p. 276-277).

To overcome the weaknesses of fixed-alternative questions (like the superficiality sometimes caused by their possibility of forcing the respondent into responses that are inappropriate when they find that none of the responses suit them), they were mixed with open-ended ones which, as Kerlinger (as cited in Cohen and Manion, 1996 p. 277) pointed out "...put a minimum restraint on the answers and their expression."

The flexibility of these open-ended questions elicited some responses that were unexpected and unanticipated by the researchers. Most of the questions used in the questionnaire, however, were direct questions like question 4.9: Does VET support your future goals? Or question 3.5: What were the main things (or people) that influenced you to choose this (VET) course?

### Survey Sample

Both snowball sampling and convenience sampling techniques were used in order to obtain the survey sample. The surveys were administered in class and were conducted between September and November 2004.

While there was no clear-cut specification to the size of the sample, the researchers for all the states involved in the research endeavoured to obtain at least the minimum size samples that could accurately represent the population under survey, and to have almost the same size sample. A sample size of 30 is held by many to be the minimum number of cases if the researcher plans to use some form of statistical analysis on the data (Cohen and Manion, 1996 p. 90-91).

In total 84 girls completed the questionnaires in South Australia, 99 in Queensland and 109 in New South Wales.

### Descriptive Research

Like most educational research, the present research falls under the category of "descriptive research" in that it is concerned with the conditions or the relationship that exists between VET and girls' future careers, the practices that prevail and the girls' point of views and the processes that are going on in VET delivery in relation to girls and young women.

The data gathered from the questionnaires was not coded, mainly because of the open ended nature of most of the questions which does not make it possible for all questions to be reduced to code numbers, the data was instead entered onto an Excel spreadsheet in its "raw" form and then descriptive statistics for each question were derived from this "raw data".

## Section 4. A Critical Review of the Literature





## A Critical Review of the Literature

Jeannie Daniels

### Introduction

This literature review forms part of the Security4Women/Women in Adult & Vocational Education (WAVE) Lifelong Learning Project that seeks to investigate the issues of economic security facing Australian women today. This review informs Stage One of the Project, managed and undertaken by WAVE, and focusing on young women and senior school-age girls, and their aspirations and opportunities for secure working futures.

The changing nature of societies and the emphasis on economic growth in Australia and other industrialised countries has seen a focus on work and the desirability of full employment encourage the spread of vocational education and training (VET) into the secondary education system. Government and industry funding continues to stimulate numerous research projects into this still poorly-defined policy area, sitting as it does between the two poles of VET and schools.

Statistics show that this movement is growing rapidly. From an enrolment of over 80,000 school students in 1998, in VET in Schools programmes, by 2002 the number had increased to more than 185,500 (Polesel *et al*, 2004; MCEETYA, 2003). School-based or school-linked vocational programmes now take several forms, conforming to three major categories: *VET in Schools*, *school-based new apprenticeships* and *other vocational learning programmes* (such as work-based learning and skills training programmes) (Malley *et al*, 2001:42-43). Programme sites and providers range from schools to TAFE Institutes, workplaces and private training providers.

Given the gendered nature of the existing VET system that is the framework used for these initiatives, there is concern that historical gendered patterns may be repeating themselves, and potentially disadvantaging young women in terms of their career aspirations and long term economic security. This research is being conducted in response to these concerns, and to the perceived lack of information relating specifically to young women and girls in programmes such as VET in Schools, New Apprenticeship programmes, and similar post-compulsory education and training schemes.

Despite the growth of VET-related programmes and increasing participation a recently published report (Long & DSF, 2004) has found that many young people in Australia are still missing out on the benefits of full time education, training and work. Significantly, this report states that female school leavers continue to face greater disadvantage than males during this period of transition from school to work, with an increasing number of girls not in school, unemployed or under-employed: 'the likelihood of female school leavers not being in full-time study or work has increased during the last decade, ...[with female] school leavers (...) more likely to be engaged in marginal activities than males' (Long, 2004:17).

Current reports such as Long's, which also reveal different issues for females and males as well as the differences in outcomes, suggest the need for a critical gender analysis in research into VET in schools and transition programmes. It is important that data be segregated by gender in the first instance, in order for such differences to be recognised and investigated, and to address the issues confronting many girls and young women as they make choices and plans for their future working lives.

A soon-to-be published report (Mackinnon, cited in Hinter, 2004) on girls leaving school early, has taken such a gendered approach. This report explicitly states the threats to girls' educational achievement and the consequent greater disadvantages they face in the world of work. These findings explore issues of violence, sexual abuse, and teenage pregnancy: these are issues quite different in nature or in degree to those experienced by boys. Mackinnon has identified areas of increasing economic disadvantage for some young women, who face a 'tougher world that offers very few unskilled career paths' (cited in Hinter, 2004).

The purposes of this critical literature review are to

- explore the literature that provides the context within which girls and young women access information and training and make choices for their current and future work/life plans
- apply a critical lens to an analysis of the role of this literature in shaping the body of knowledge in relation to girls, young women and VET
- identify existing gaps in the literature and provide a resource for possible future research

## A Critical Review of the Literature

Between sixty and eighty documents were reviewed in order to gain a reasonably wide literature base for this review. From a starting period of the early 1990s, a range of literature produced since then and up to 2004 was collected and investigated. Both Australian and international literature was accessed, in acknowledgement of the globalised nature of societies and their institutions, such as VET. The literature base covered books, journal articles, government-funded and industry-funded research papers and scholarly research, policies and related documents, including media releases and budget papers, and newspaper articles. Literature was accessed both from the internet and in hard copy.

The focus of the literature is equally broad, covering areas of VET, VET in schools, VET and women, women and work, post-compulsory education, vocational education of girls, options and choices in VET in schools and early school-leaving, as well as gender and equity issues and critique less directly related to the specific focus of this review, that is, girls and young women and their working futures. While this literature does not directly align itself with the focus of this review, the content is applicable and relevant to the wider context within which the issues of girls, young women and VET are situated.

The terms *gender* and *equity* are problematic: some concerns were identified regarding the way in which these terms are being used to advance economic goals rather than issues of justice and equality. Such use is not advantageous to a critique of this nature, which seeks to illuminate specifically female issues of gender and equity. Therefore it was decided to avoid using the term *equity*, and refer to *gendered issues* and *girls and gender* rather than *gender*, thus maintaining the focus on particular issues of concern for girls and young women, and acknowledging the differences of, and within gender.

The focus on *girls* and *young women* is not intended to suggest that these are homogeneous groupings: on the contrary, the diversity of individuals' experiences, needs and aspirations, reflect a broad spectrum of social and environmental influences and conditions.

The literature review is divided into two main parts. Part One provides a background to the current context of post-compulsory schooling and transitions to work. Relevant literature from the early to mid 1990s to the present time is reviewed, exploring the changing attitudes, perceptions and environments of school-to-work transition programmes. Specifically identified is how girls, and girls' needs, have been positioned in research, policy and related literature over this period. The literature concerning the growth of VET in schools, and similar transition to work programmes is explored from number of perspectives. A changing focus in the literature is identified, as the increasing vocationalism of post-compulsory schooling sees a corresponding decrease in the attention given to girls' gendered issues.

The second part explores a range of recent literature in order to identify the focus of current research and debate. This describes how this literature variously talks about, or makes invisible, issues of gender and girls and young women. Four issues from the literature are selected and explored in relation to their relevance to the research priorities of this stage of the Lifelong Learning Project. These four issues are discussed in the context of how they impact upon girls and young women in their future career and life plans and choices.

The review concludes with a brief summary of the issues identified, and indicates areas where it is believed change is needed in order to create viable opportunities for young women to achieve sustainable working futures.

## A Critical Review of the Literature

### Part 1. A recent history of VET, young women and girls

#### Trends in VET, schooling and work

Over the last decade, the growth of Vocational Education and Training (VET) in Australia and internationally has been largely driven by economic and social reforms (Butler & Ferrier, 2000; Malley *et al* 2001). Trends towards globalisation have seen an internationalisation of the economy and the marketplace, and a demand for skills to support this global economy. Ryan (2002:2) calls it 'the decade of the new vocationalism'. At the same time, changes have occurred on a local level, involving considerable shifts in social 'norms'. In Australia the number of women entering the workforce continues to increase (Dwyer & Wyn, 2001; Kenway & Willis, 1995; Pocock, 2003) and a 'welfare to work' agenda pushed by both Federal Labor and Coalition governments has seen the proliferation of strategies aimed at producing a work-ready population of skilled workers, female and male.

The political drive to provide the skills to be competitive both in the world market and at a local level has been a factor leading to the increasing vocationalism of education, a move that has led Dwyer & Wyn (2001:51) to observe that 'economic planning at a national level has come to dictate to public policy concerning education'.

In the last decade the industrialised countries of the world have seen an accelerated move to situate vocational education programmes within secondary school curricula. This move has been monitored in a number of reports commissioned and published by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), concerned with ensuring young people make a successful transition from school to working life (OECD 2000; also see Malley *et al*, 2001; Ryan, 2002). Responding to OECD concerns, McDonald *et al* (2000:1) claim that 'the increased participation of learners in real work settings, through New Apprenticeships and VET in schools' has been a significant achievement in the Australian context.

The pressure to position and build vocationalism within the school setting is not new in Australia or elsewhere, but has been a cyclic response to intermittent periods of low employment for young people.

Placing the current move in this cycle, Ryan (2002:1) observes that 'Australian education systems at the beginning of the twenty-first century are once more in a period in which great hope is placed on an expanded vocational dimension to school students' learning'. In Australia, this period probably began some time earlier with the release of a national report (Finn 1991) into post-compulsory education and training for young people (Malley *et al*, 2001).

#### Focusing on young women and girls

As vocational programmes reached deeper into secondary schools' curricula, a strong body of research developed leading up to and into the 21<sup>st</sup> century. This research began to uncover and investigate many different aspects of young people's options and choices in post-compulsory education. A substantial body of this literature focussed on the diverse range of, and differently experienced, needs of girls preparing to make choices and explore their future work options and aspirations.

Concerns were raised in Australian and international literature, that the gendered nature of the social world and the world of work were problematic for girls (Arnot, David & Weiner, 1999; Gilbert, 1996; Gilbert and Taylor, 1991; Kenway & Willis, 1995; UNESCO, 1995). Equitable outcomes and pathways for girls, it was suggested, would require approaches and strategies that recognised issues that either did not confront boys, or were experienced differently. In Australia, a Victorian Education Discussion paper was very clear about the gendered nature of girls' experiences, stating

*...(e)ducational opportunities for girls may sometimes be influenced by factors external to the school; for example, pregnancy, motherhood, violence in the home, sexual abuse, poverty and homelessness, domestic abuse, parental expectations and the value placed on females within the community. (Directorate of School Education, 1993:16)*

This document goes on to pose a number of questions designed to stimulate debate around ways of broadening girls' options, choices and achievements, based on an explicit acceptance of the strongly gendered constructions of cultural, social, and domestic barriers to equality of access and outcomes.



## A Critical Review of the Literature

Internationally, publications such as *Vocational Guidance for Equal Access and Opportunity for Girls and Women in Technical and Vocational Education*, a UNESCO publication (Miller & Vetter, 1996), reported on identified needs of girls and explored equity-based programmes from a range of countries. Issues of gender, girls, and work were made explicit, and discussed and debated widely as the move to link post-compulsory schooling with VET and with work became a major focus of educational research and policy. Such differently-experienced gendered issues as sex-based harassment also concerned Collins *et al* (1996) in their investigation into gender construction and gendered behaviours in schools. This study looked at gender issues for young people of each sex, and documented how actions can impact differently on boys and girls because of these gendered constructions. The authors also suggested that research was needed in the area of young women's career choices and priorities, which they saw as 'an important area for a large study in its own right' (Collins *et al*, 1996:95).

### VET and schools: growth, directions and concerns

Educational policy continued to develop and strengthen links between secondary schools, vocational training institutions and the workplace, through initiatives such as VET in schools, New Apprenticeship Schemes (also called Modern Apprenticeship Schemes), Job Placement, Employment and Training (JPET) programmes, and other work-related training opportunities. Student participation increased with activity in VET in schools rising from sixteen percent in 1996 to forty-four percent in 2002 (MCEETYA, 2003). Whilst these moves have received acknowledgment and cautious acceptance (McDonald 1999) there have been ongoing concerns regarding their implementation, scope, and application to the workplace (Gonczi, 1997; James, 2000; McDonald *et al*, 2000; Ryan, 2002; Stokes, 1998; Stratheedee, 2003).

One such concern was that the model being used to implement this school-based vocationalism, that is, the traditional VET model, had been developed with little foundational research (McDonald *et al*, 1992; McDonald, 1999; Malley *et al*, 2001). The gendered environment of the apprenticeship/trades culture on which VET is based concerned a number of researchers (Butler & Ferrier, 2000; Connole, 1997; Kenway & Willis, 1995). Kenway and Willis (1995) identified the absence of girls' and women's issues in school-based VET programs.

Noting that the inclusion of girls and women was never a major concern of 'the union movement's training reform', which sought economic equity for (predominantly male) apprentices, Butler & Ferrier (2000:61) explained

*Australia's vocational training system has been organised historically on the (neo-colonial) model of British apprenticeships around which male-dominated 'craft' unions organised.*

To counter such concerns Kenway & Willis (1995) had suggested a critical approach to vocational learning in schools. Urging the importance of teaching both girls and boys about the gendered nature of work, they referred to *The National Action Plan for the Education of Girls, 1993-1997*. This document, the (then) current policy on girls' education, affirmed that

*...(w)ork education needs to acknowledge and critically examine the historical forces underlying such things as ...the influence of work bargaining processes, including trade unions, on the male and female work forces (1993:29, quoted in Kenway & Willis, 1995:85).*

Although girls are more likely than boys to choose further or higher education before moving into the workforce on school completion (James, 2000), most young women expect eventually to move into the paid workforce, and stay there for a substantial period or periods of their adult lives (Looker, 2000). In Australia, many young women in fact begin their employment experiences whilst still at school (Dwyer & Wyn, 2001). Economic, political and social pressures have combined to force the direction of women's working lives and young women's working futures, and these expectations are in line with women's increasing presence in a workforce identified as the most gender-segregated of all OECD countries (Dwyer & Wyn, 2001; Wallace, 1999).

The entry of more and more women into the paid workforce has not been matched by strategies to support women's participation. A recent review of literature on Women and VET suggests that programmes designed to provide equitable participation for women in VET do little to address the deeply entrenched, masculinist nature of the VET system, while conceding that

*...(w)omen have been encouraged into VET and through ...provision of support, advice and childcare, and changes in course structure and organisation, their VET experience has been improved. However, the major problems of the past remain. (Butler & Ferrier, 2000:49).*

## A Critical Review of the Literature

### Girls and young women: out of focus

As the literature concerned with young people's transitions from school to work has grown, there has been a steady but clear change in focus. Issues of gendered constructions and their implications for girls have given way to concerns of increased participation, inclusion, and relevance to the marketplace. Butler & Ferrier (2000:78) in their review of the literature on women and VET warned of the 'shifting focus: from 'girls' to 'gender' [as a generic concept]. Kenway & Willis' (1995) call for career education that addressed the gendered environment of both the workplace and vocational education has not been heeded in this development.

Since the turn of the century, these issues of girls, and of their gendered constructions, which featured so predominantly in the literature of the mid 1990s, have now almost disappeared altogether. '(M)otherhood, pregnancy, domestic responsibilities, violence and abuse and other events related to being female' (Miller & VETter, 1996:16) are no longer the concern of policy. The explicit positioning of girls and gender in *The National Action Plan for the Education of Girls 1993-1997* (AEC 1993) has been transformed into a gender-equal, if not gender-neutral framework which assumes equality in the types and simplicities of gendered issues and disadvantages experienced by young women and young men (Ailwood & Lingard, 2001).

Gendered issues, as they affect young women, have given way to the 'slippery concepts of equality and equity in VET' (Butler & Ferrier, 2000:63) in the current literature dealing with the framing and implementation of VET in schools, vocational transitions and school-based training schemes. Girls have become out of focus, if not lost completely, in gender-blind discourses of inclusion and integration predominating in the literature on post-compulsory education, VET, and school to work transitions.

## A Critical Review of the Literature

### Part 2. Positioning the Literature

#### Talking about VET in schools and school to work transitions

There is a substantial body of literature dealing with post-compulsory schooling, transitions to work, vocational education in schools, and related issues. This diverse literature is drawn from many perspectives, and identifies a range of issues relevant to this growing field of research. Some of the major issues identified for young people, and subject to continued debate and critique, are those of increasing participation and early school leaving (ANTA, 2001; Applied Economics, 2002; Teese, 2004), and improving options, choices and outcomes for selected groups of young people (Beavis *et al* 2004; James, 2000; Quay Connection, 2003).

Concerns which dominate across the literature focus particularly on strengthening and building on the existing post-compulsory VET model, using concepts of linkages, pathways and integration, terms that occur frequently across the range of literature. These keywords are used to describe a wide range of initiatives, strategies and recommendations, focussing on such diverse areas as industry needs (Ghost, 2002), the role of VET in building social capital (Kearns, 2004; Ramsden, Bennett & Fuller, 2004), teacher perspectives and training (Adams & Boote, 2004; Schneyder, 2002), curriculum (Ryan, 2002) and policy (Malley *et al*, 2001). These themes, repeated in the Australian and international literature, and providing the framework and the focus for present and future directions for research, policy and programmes for youth and school to work transitions, can be summarised thus:

*The recurring themes of broadening and linkage...are important for developments of school-based vocationalism in Australia. The OECD notes a consistent movement away from numerous occupationally defined vocational pathways to fewer broadly defined industry ones ... For many countries this means the provision of broad-based generic skills and broad-based industry skills sufficient to ensure that young people have a sound basis for continued learning. More successful linkage strategies (from school to work or to further education or to both) seem to be associated with double qualification processes and linked modules of study, work-based learning provision and formal processes of articulation from one qualification to the other. (Malley *et al*, 2001:25)*

With these themes predominating across the range of literatures, it is concerning that most of this recent vocational education literature makes very little mention of any issues specific to young women and girls, or, more signifi-

cantly, how these identified issues may be experienced differently to boys.

The discourses produced by, and dominating, this extensive body of Australian and international literature have been criticised for assuming a sameness of young peoples' needs and outcomes (Ailwood & Lingard, 2001). These assumptions, which suggest that girls' gendered issues have been resolved, have steered the equity debate towards different target groups, with researchers now focussing on indigenous youth (Curtain & Gook, 2003), youth at risk of early school leaving (Applied Economics 2002; McDonald 2000; Smyth *et al*, 2000; Teese, 2004) and youth disadvantaged by location (Kilpatrick *et al*, 2004). While such groups are indeed worthy equity targets, their representation as non gender-specific groups limits discussion, analysis and critique of the differences of, or within, gender, and of the complex interconnecting effects of gender with such factors as class, culture, indigeneity and ability. Although the importance of such issues cannot be disputed, it seems their presence in the literature has replaced, rather than added to, the debate on girls' gendered issues.

The abundance of recent literature in Australia and internationally, informing the growing area of VET for post-compulsory school students and young people has not been matched by substantially improved outcomes for girls. Fenwick (2004) notes that in Canada, inequalities for girls and young women continue to operate both in access to, and experience of, programmes. A recent Australian study (Quay Connection, 2001:44-45) found that '(f)emale VET in schools students are offered a narrow range of subjects, which tend to direct them into occupations which are female dominated'. Even when 'schools did offer 'male' subjects, girls still tended to choose traditionally female] fields'.

Such research identifies a lack of focus in girls' career choices and planning. It is hardly surprising then, that a number of studies (Dwyer & Wyn, 2001; Collins, Kenway & McLeod, 2000; House of Representatives, 2004) have found that girls' Year 11 and 12 curricular choices do not necessarily equip them for smooth transitions into rewarding careers:

*Girls' post-compulsory pathways are less likely to lead to successful labour market outcomes...Girls are less likely to secure full-time employment, more likely to be involved in part-time employment and much more likely to be undertaking activities which put them out of the labour market' (Collins, Kenway & McLeod, 2000:7)*

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Despite this unsatisfactory situation, and despite the efforts of some researchers to explore and encourage debate on such ongoing issues for girls and vocational education, there is an unmistakable sense that gender, in relation to girls and young women, is no longer on the mainstream agenda for VET and school to work transitions.

### Talking about girls and young women

To find out how young women's working futures are being debated in the literature, it is necessary to investigate in greater depth how the literature talks (or does not talk) about gender, and about young women and girls. In the literature reviewed, some authors do identify gender as an issue, whilst in others it is not mentioned at all.

There is a general shift towards a more generic approach to problem solving issues for boys and girls, who are now bundled together under the banner of *young people* and *youth*.

This generic approach is evident in policy documents, funded research and educational research and professional journal articles. It is widespread in the literature. This literature does however vary substantially in both perspective and in focus, with approaches recommending a broadening of both the scope and definition of VET in schools (Ryan, 2002) and strengthening links to other training institutions (Polesel *et al*, 2004), and industry (Ghost, 2002) as well as to society and community (Ramsden, Bennett & Fuller, 2004). Other research focuses on the need to provide suitable programs (Beavis *et al*, 2004; DSF, 2002; Smith & Wilson, 2002), and generic skilling for a changing workforce (Malley *et al*, 2001).

Of the literature that does make reference to gender, or differences between girls' and boys' needs, there is a wide variation in the importance given to these differences, and an even wider way in which *gender* is defined and positioned in the youth, education and training debate.

A number of documents provide a breakdown of statistics and figures by female and male (Curtain & Gook, 2003; Smyth, 2003), but provide very little (or no) further comment or interpretation. Others mention gender briefly in the body of the work, and may or may not refer to it again in the discussion, summary or conclusion (House of Representatives, 2004; James, 2000; Smyth *et al*, 2000). An example of this tokenistic approach to gendered issues is

illustrated in a recent government report into vocational education in schools (House of Representatives 2004). Less than two pages of the two hundred and eighty pages of the main body of the document are devoted to gender. There is no mention of gender in the Executive Summary, or the Conclusions. Similarly, Smyth *et al* (2000), in their investigation into reasons for early school leaving, devote a section to gender, and identify a number of highly significant issues for girls contemplating their future careers. The gendered nature of work and pathways to work is acknowledged, and the authors also explore differences due to the intersections of gender, class and poverty. They are in no doubt that '(t)he opportunities for young women and young men are different' (Smyth *et al*, 2000:171) and yet, having raised a number of highly critical issues, these authors do not refer to them in the conclusion, nor are these issues identified as themes worthy of further action.

More encouragingly, Beavis *et al* (2004), exploring post-school aspirations of young people, identify differences for 'at-risk' girls and boys, and carry these findings through to recommendations that gender be acknowledged as an issue in programme development. This research also identifies the interplay of gender with poverty and socio-economics status, explored also by Collins, Kenway & McLeod (2000) and Dwyer & Wyn (2001). Dwyer & Wyn are amongst those who warn of the gender-blind approach currently informing VET in Schools and school to work transitions (also see Ailwood & Lingard, 2001; Fenwick, 2004 and Looker, 2000). An even greater concern is raised by Hammond (2000) who recognises that traditional stereotypes are being reproduced in VET in Schools programmes, a concern shared by a number of researchers (see Dwyer & Wyn, 2001; Marginson, 1999; Smyth *et al*, 2000; and Quay Connection, 2003). Understanding that these programmes are framed within 'the traditional male domains of education and work' (Dwyer & Wyn, 2001:143) such researchers are attempting to position gendered issues at the centre of the VET in schools debate.



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### (Re)locating girls and young women

Whilst the lack of debate around girls and gender is concerning, other related concerns have emerged from this reading of the literature, that deserve closer investigation. Although these themes are often not presented in the literature in a context which discusses, or even acknowledges, gendered issues, each one impacts in some way on the career aspirations of girls and young women, on the development of programmes and policies guiding these career choices, and on continuing and future research in the areas of VET in schools and school to work transitions. Four of these themes have been selected for discussion: gendered dispositions, the work/life divide, political agendas and the need for broad-based research.

#### Gendered dispositions

A recent study of Canadian youth (Looker, 2000) found that young women displayed 'gendered dispositions' when asked about their career aspirations and choices. Quoting McCall (1992), Looker (2000:2) says 'gender is more than simply another variable to be included in prediction equation'. Rather, she sees gender as a type of embodied cultural capital. Certain forms of capital 'have gendered meanings because they are given form by gendered dispositions' (p. 842). Positioning this concept within the context of women and work, Looker, again quoting McCall, explains

*...[w]omen internalise opposition itself, rather than one side of the opposition, for they are mediating between at least two domains: the masculine/public world of paid work and the feminine/personal world of human reproduction, encountering patriarchal relations in both (McCall, 1992:848 in Looker, 2000:2).*

What Looker is referring to is

*...the effect of gender on decisions about paid work and on the ways in which women, but not men, see themselves combining this paid work and the unwaged work associated with house-work and child rearing. (2000:2)*

Looker's research identified this effect on young people's choices and aspirations for their future career paths. Young women in her study placed family and relationships high on the list of what they considered important. Young men in contrast, placed priority on material gain, such as earning 'a lot of money' (2000: 8).

*Gendered dispositions have been documented (although not always named) in other research concerned with the different ways in which girls and boys talk about and choose their tran-*

*sitional/career pathways (Beavis et al, 2004; Dwyer & Wyn, 2001; Gonick, 2004; James, 2000; Marks & Houston, 2002; Smyth et al, 2000; University of Flensburg, n.d.). Amongst these works, conclusions and findings vary in regard to how young women portray these internalised dispositions: these variations may be due to the assumptions of the researcher, the focus of the research, or the methods used (such as the questions asked) in the study. Marks & Houston (2002) found that although girls understand that they are entitled to the same benefits of choice and may aspire to equally rewarding futures, they place their own expectations more realistically. That is, young women are choosing career paths compatible with motherhood, understanding that society has yet to address 'issues that surround making work compatible with a parenting role' (2002:335). In contrast, whilst Looker's (2000:7) study also found that the female participants in her study expect to be primary child-carers, her data on career choices suggested that, initially, young women aim 'as high if not higher, than men'.*

Polesel et al (2004:49), investigating the reasons students gave for enrolling in VET, claim that 'no statistically significant differences were found between male and female respondents' but found that boys were more likely than girls to be guided by parental encouragement. This finding is inconsistent with other research that has identified clear differences between girls' and boys' work- and training-related choices and the influences that bear on those choices (Beavis et al, 2004; Dwyer & Wyn, 2001). One area of congruence is that girls consistently modify their career expectations when asked about combining paid work with childcare and family responsibilities. Boys do not.

Despite, or perhaps because of, the conflicting opinions and research findings, it is clear that more investigation is needed into the strong indications that the contexts in which young women and young men place their future expectations are significantly different. These clearly identified differences are worthy of attention, in an environment of generically-defined needs and inequitable outcomes, for

*...one of the paradoxes of the increased participation of young women in education is that women have not transformed their educational achievements into labour-force advantage to nearly the same extent. (Dwyer & Wyn, 2001:131)*

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### The work/life divide

The current work/life situation for women explains why this is so. Women continue to be disadvantaged in the paid workforce. Despite the increasing numbers of women participating in the paid workforce, women continue to be disadvantaged in many areas (Pocock, 2003; Preston & Burgess, 2003). Over 10 years ago Blackmore (1997:224) spoke of the 'gendering of skill and vocationalism in education'. Wallace (1999:268) noted in 1999 that '(i)n Australia, the majority of women have been situated in feminised occupations and placed lower down in the jobs hierarchy'. She explained that women were receiving less training and fewer opportunities than their male counterparts, and were clustered in the lower paying service occupations and dead-end jobs.

While successive policies have recognised ongoing issues of equity and participation, attempts to provide greater opportunities for women through strategies based on concepts such as 'integration with visibility' (ANTA 2004:3) have been largely unsuccessful so far. The narrow focus on inclusion in paid work neither addresses commitments outside the workforce, nor the segregation of women into low-paid and insecure jobs that is in part a consequence of this particular form of 'inclusivity'.

There is little in current policy initiatives that addresses the work/life collision, the continuing unpaid contributions of women to society or the segregated nature of women's paid work (Pocock, 2003). Yet it is these same policy frameworks that are being used to develop training and employment links in schools. Young women and girls are being offered information and opportunities around their futures, based on a framework which is unable to confront and address the very real issues faced by their mothers, aunts and sisters already struggling to combine family responsibilities with earning a sustainable income. It is 'women's larger responsibility for the domestic sphere' (Pocock, 2003:148) that produces this struggle, and results in many women working for lower wages in part-time or casual work, or locked in dead-end jobs with little chance of promotion. It is the culture of work that needs to change, according to researchers in this area (Pocock, 2003; Quay Connection, 2003). For those women who seek paid work (either by choice or necessity) and also wish to have families, the work available is still often that which is low-paid, insecure and makes unreasonable demands on their time.

The clear lack of any dedicated attempt to alter this situation for young women approaching transitions to work is evident in the findings of a recent report into women in VET. This report found that the girls in their study were provided mainly 'female subject' choices for VET in schools programs, and 'there is little sense of career pathways or options - girls fall into traditional subjects by default' (Quay Connection, 2003:45).

Recent research in Australia shows that young women and girls do not aspire to the 'white picket fence' notion of the traditional family, with the male breadwinner and the full-time, stay-at-home mother. This generation has been led to expect independent economic futures (Wyn, 2003 in Horin & Moses, 2003; Summers, 2003). International research (Looker, 2000; Marks & Houston, 2002) supports this view. Marks & Houston (2002:322) note in their study of young people's future career expectations that even those girls who 'indicated a marked preference to care full time for their children had a strong image of themselves as career women'. However, Summers (2003) has identified a sense of disillusionment and confusion amongst women that society has not provided what was promised.

Two distinct responses to this are evidence of young women's struggles to maintain a sense of agency over their futures. Many are delaying having children. Recent publications (Pocock, 2003; Summers, 2003) attest to Australia's declining birth rate, and the role of ongoing discriminatory workplace practices and social policy in the decisions of many working women to defer motherhood in order to achieve financial security. Others, identified in Mackinnon's (cited in Hinter, 2004) study of girls leaving school early, are considering (and choosing) pregnancy as a desirable outcome, perhaps to enable them to achieve a sense of purpose and self-value not accessible to them through the present education system. These young women are subsequently doubly disadvantaged, by their lack of higher education or training qualifications, and by being mothers (and often single mothers) in a family-unfriendly labour market system.

Until this issue of the imbalance between work and life is given serious consideration in VET policy, and women's current work/life situation improves, girls will continue to be steered into a segregated inequitable labour market, and given limited career and life choices.

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### Political agendas

The current political climate in Australia appears to be one not overly concerned with providing equitable and sustainable employment opportunities for all: while the labour market remains highly segregated, women's and girls' gendered issues have all but disappeared from the political agenda (Preston & Burgess, 2003). Rod Cameron, head of one large Australian polling company claims 'there are no women's issues' (Cameron, cited in Shaw, 2004). The confident nature of Cameron's sweeping pronouncement indicates that he believes this to be a widely-held and popular notion.

Preston & Burgess (2003:497) suggest that such a claim depends for its legitimacy on some degree of complicity by government, demonstrated by (at the very least) an 'absence of political will', if not outright agreement. Summers concurs, noting the traditional stance of the present government's agenda, and says, of the current Prime Minister, 'he thinks that women should be in the home and he's used every arm of policy to try and achieve that' (Shaw, 2004).

An investigation of recent government media releases on youth and education policy indicates a similar approach to young women and girls, revealing no specific targets or strategies aimed at addressing girls' vocational education needs. A typical example is a media release of 7<sup>th</sup> July 2004 that concerns Local Community Partnerships (LCPs), a network of VET provider partnerships. In this document, the Minister for Education, Science and Training claims 'the government is committed to providing young Australians with every opportunity to make the transition through school and from school to further education, training or employment' (Nelson, 2004). Substantial amounts of funding are being provided for a national conference, to strengthen community/school and industry/school links, and provide young people with opportunities to make positive and appropriate transitions from school to work. However, as with other government documents, this one is completely gender-blind in its approach to *young people*, *Australian youth* and *young Australians*. Assumptions of the identical needs of girls and boys - to the point where they are indistinguishable from each other - are embedded in educational policy discourses such as this.

Although much of the international literature also continues to talk of *young people's* issues, it seems that, in some countries, there is a growing recognition that gender issues have in fact been hidden, and not resolved. The consequent refocus on gendered issues can be demonstrated in the two following examples of initiatives aimed at addressing work/life imbalances and inequalities for women and girls. A *Women and Work Commission* has recently been created in the United Kingdom, in acknowledgement of ongoing concerns for women in relation to paid work, income, and 'other issues affecting women's employment' (*The Scotsman*, 24 July 2004). This Commission will look at the experiences of women in areas such as access and opportunity in employment, the implications of having children, and similar concerns as they specifically relate to women.

In Germany, the Federal Ministry of Education and Research has placed gender central to its education and research policy, emphasising that 'equal opportunity for women is to be realised consistently and across all measures and programmes. Specific impulses are (to be) given through targeted measures' (BMBF, 2001:5). Included in this strategy, called Gender Mainstreaming, are vocational programmes for girls, focussing on issues specific to that country's situation, such as the low numbers of girls using the internet, therefore not accessing careers in the IT field. Emphasising the need for female role models (in areas of science and technology, for example), BMBF promote the linkages connecting women's position in the workforce, and the career opportunities given to girls still in school.

Compare these two examples with Australia's most recent VET policy, a national strategy for vocational education and training in which women are mentioned only once. This document, *Shaping Our Future* (ANTA, 2003): made women so invisible that a supporting paper (with the same title prefixed by the word *Women* (ANTA, 2004)) was subsequently produced due to the insistence of a national representation of women in VET. This energy rested on two years of evaluative work of the previous women-focused agenda for action, consultation, and development of advice and strategies to enhance the position of women in VET (e.g. see Quay Connection, 2003).

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There are cautionary voices however, in response to attempts to provide more equitable career paths for women, and career futures for young women and girls. Preston and Burgess (2003), alluding to Rubery, Smith & Fagan's argument from a European perspective of women and work, ask

*...whether the policy objective should be to promote equality between the sexes (gender mainstreaming) or whether there should be recognition of (the) fundamental gender differences and how they impinge on opportunities to participate in paid work. (Preston & Burgess, 2003:500)*

Stratigaki (2004) agrees, warning that the concept of gender has been co-opted to suit policy priorities of the European Union, and that it has been reconstructed as a market-oriented objective. Stratigaki (2004:50) claims that the focus of this reconstructed *gender* is no longer 'stereotyped gender relations', but increasing women's employability, or their capacity to work, and is no more in the interests of girls or women than gender-blind policy.

Political agendas are also a concern of Titus (2004) who identifies another perspective on the cooption of gender in the debate on educational needs. Titus claims that boys' underachievement is in fact a socially engineered construction, and his concern is that this particular political agenda, dominating in the USA and elsewhere, including Australia, in fact obscures issues such as girls needs. Yates (1997:345) is more cautious in voicing her concerns, but warns that the interest in researching boys 'also raises challenges about how to maintain and develop the research on girls'.

While many areas of concern for boys' educational and vocational outcomes have been identified (see Cresswell, Rowe & Withers, 2002; Van Houtte, 2004), it is suggested by some that the issue of boys underachievement is not simply one of too much attention being given to girls (Kenway, Watkins and Tregenza, 1999). Fenwick (2004:178) alludes to a more complex situation, asking 'how is it that girls can enjoy higher overall educational achievement but significantly lower economic achievement than boys?'

A recently published government report on VET in schools (House of Representatives, 2004:78) states, '(t)he Committee had insufficient opportunity to adequately pursue the gender division in participation' although clear gender differences, with girls clustered in service industry

areas, were clearly identified. This statement suggests the issue was considered worthy of further investigation, at least by the committee, yet there is no recommendation of this in the conclusion of this government report. Given that the Committee states that the issue deserves ongoing investigation, the lack of further mention in the report suggests that committee members understand a prevailing political climate ensuring that any such recommendations will not be given priority. Issues that indicate specific attention to the needs of young women and girls have indeed become politically unfashionable, and 'less attractive to funding bodies' (Yates, 1997:345).

### Lack of broad-based research

Such political agendas must be able to be identified and debated, to prevent particular vested interests and personal preferences to define and limit the course of research in the area of VET and schools. In order to address the diverse range of vocational and educational needs of young women and men, policy must be informed by broad-based research, both funded and independent, and attention must be given to research-based issues. To answer questions such as Fenwick's, research needs to explore hidden issues as well as identified problems, and be broad-ranging in its answerability to, and independence from, the funding bodies, policy makers and other powerful stakeholders.

The lack of a broad research base informing VET, and VET in Schools has concerned researchers and educators for some years (Fagan, 2002; McDonald *et al*, 1992; McDonald, 1999; Malley *et al*, 2001). While there is more recently a substantial and growing body of research in the area of young people, school and VET, much of this is government-funded, and applies a particular lens to specific frames of investigation. The majority of this research focuses on generically-framed issues of equity for young people, and approaches to strengthening and building on the existing VET framework of school to work transitions.

The reasons for this particular research focus are explained by Dwyer & Wyn (2001:51):

*We have now reached a stage where economic planning at a national level has come to dictate to public policy concerning education. One of the worst aspects of this is the reliance on statistical models setting future targets based on a projection of current trends.*



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This mindset ensures that major research funding is directed to further investigation of existing statistical models and frameworks of equity and inclusion.

Acknowledging that the VET in schools concept has been poorly and selectively informed, Malley *et al* (2001:35) confirm that 'research has played a very small role in informing policy developments over the past decade'. These researchers identify gaps and omissions in the literature such as defining the purpose of VET in schools, connecting and integrating vocational models, and appropriate teaching methods. It is unfortunate that they fail to identify a gap in the literature exploring why girls are still being steered into particular areas of work, and why outcomes for women are less than for men.

The lack of attention given to this issue of girls' gendered educational and vocational choices and outcomes, evident across the range of literature reviewed, is identified by a small number of researchers such as Marginson (1999), Dwyer & Wyn (2001) and Quay Connection (2003). Quay Connection's report on Women in VET 2003, suggests further research on how young women and girls make these choices, and how certain factors impact upon them, emphasising that the transition period from school to training or work is 'a critical juncture for girls and young women' (Quay Connection, 2003:53).

Current research on VET in schools within the existing framework is not working to identify and address girls' needs. Amongst the small body of literature on girls and vocational education, there are calls for a return to research from a feminist theoretical perspective (Looker, 2000; Preston & Burgess, 2003). Preston & Burgess (2003:497) explain that much current research on women and work 'is restricted to a relatively narrow agenda of pay equity, labour supply, and...child care'. This framework of women's issues excludes other perspectives and so limits the possible outcomes, such as a feminist analysis of issues identified in feminist literature as relevant and important to women. Fagan (2002) urges ongoing research into the changing world of work, which, as others (Quay Connection, 2003) have identified, will affect girls choosing to train in areas where job growth is limited. The profound changes occurring in the world of work, and in society, impact upon girls' sense of self and identity, as they 'live the effects of neoliberal discourses' (Gonick, 2004:189).

The shifting perceptions of self which accompany young women's engagement with these dramatic changes in society and the workplace, as well as the particular circumstances of their lives, illustrate another gap in the research literature, identified by Beavis *et al* (2004) and Dwyer & Wyn (2001). Namely, research which explores issues from the perspective of the participants, and allows young women and girls to name and contextualise their own diverse experiences and identify their own needs. From such findings programmes could be developed which explore the diverse ways in which 'young people see themselves and the world of work' (Beavis *et al*, 2004:71).

These authors recommend such an approach as a starting point, for the interplay of the diverse factors which constitute experiences of girls and young women create needs which must also be investigated in the contexts of the influences of gender and vocational orientation, indigeneity, class, culture, ability and poverty. As Dwyer and Wyn explain, '(r)ather than simply universalising young women or young men, specific studies of young people within their social, political and economic environment are vital'. Arguing for this approach as a way of legitimising girls' experiences, they add '(m)ost importantly, research can contribute an understanding of the varied meanings of agency in young women's actions, writing and stories' (Dwyer and Wyn, 2001:143).

Gonick (2004) explains that constructions of *woman*, *girl* and *individual* are being continually challenged and reinvented through current dominant discourses such as VET policy, and labour equity. She goes on to suggest

*...while traditional femininity is being undone through its inclusion in discourses of individualism, rationality and adulthood, it is also reinscribed through an ever increasing array of contradictions (Gonick, 2004:189)*

Such a positioning of girls' sense of self suggests the need for a continuing, ongoing investigation and evaluation of girls and gender, in this case in the context of VET, VET in schools and transition to work programmes.

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### Discussion: the case for re-examining research, policy and practice

It is interesting to note that much of the literature from which the four selected issues were drawn did not claim to address, or even acknowledge, girl-focussed vocational issues, although of course some was directed specifically to this area. It is indicative of the gender-blindness pervading research and policy in the area of girls, young women and vocational education, that researchers are identifying many such issues, yet not recognising (or being willing to recognise) these as gender-based issues, or as being worthy of further scrutiny.

Yet the four identified issues are only an indication of the breadth and diversity of concerns regarding secure working futures for girls and young women. Each one of these issues of gendered dispositions, the work/life divide, political agendas and the lack of broad-based research, connects with and impacts upon the others, in a variety of ways, producing very different needs, expectations, choices and outcomes amongst girls and young women. They do not operate, nor should they be investigated, in isolation.

This review has argued that profoundly gendered cultural and social expectations are disadvantaging young women even before they begin their transition to work along a pathway littered with limited choice, selective opportunities and inequitable outcomes. Research on girls in school-based VET and similar programmes must therefore be undertaken within the broader context of current issues for women in society and in the workforce.

VET issues for girls cannot be separated from the current work/life collision and career disadvantage felt most acutely by women (Pocock, 2003). A gender-sensitive career education suggested by Kenway & Willis (1995) and more recently Fenwick (2004) and Marks & Houston (2002) would enable girls and young women (and boys and young men) to critically appraise the masculinist and gendered nature of the paid workforce. Looker (2000) and Marks & Houston (2002), perhaps mindful of the gendered dispositions which predominate in young women's career choices, go a step further, suggesting a wide-ranging change in the mindset of life and work:

*Employers and policy-makers also need to address whether the world of work and particular occupations are in fact compatible with the responsibility for the care of children' (Marks & Houston, 2002:335).*

The fast-changing world of work and the secure and equitable positioning of girls and young women in this area of their lives require a framework of policy, programmes and support that is responsive to these changes and to the stated aspirations of these young women. Political agendas that would prefer all women to marry and become 'stay-at-home-housewives', is neither practical in this economic climate, nor is it a role that young women have stated that they want to take on. Yet this agenda dominates major research and funding areas, where the continuing focus on generic 'youth' effectively sidesteps the specific concerns of females in the period of transition from school to work.

Of the other issues which emerged during this investigation of the literature, but which this review is unable to explore in detail due to constraints of time, the notion of linking VET to concepts of social capital requires a brief mention. A number of researchers emphasise the advantages of building social capital through strong community links, as a framework for developing a broader base for future VET in Schools initiatives. Fagan (2002) commends the Scottish approach to school-industry linkages, which focuses on the social aspects of the changing nature of work. She warns:

*If we continue with current approaches to education, we will continue to urge young people towards ideals of employment and career choices that will exist in reality for a very small proportion of school leavers. Earlier choices may have to be made about pathways in liberal or vocational education, and society would become divided on issues of well-being, prosperity, security of employment and quality of work (Fagan, 2002:67).*

Fagan's warning is particularly topical, given the apparent development of a distinct underclass of young mothers without post-compulsory educational qualifications or access to appropriate employment, and little chance of financial security. Ramsden, Bennett & Fuller (2004:162) similarly emphasise the 'Scottish experience' that integrates human and social capital into learning. Kearns gives an Australian example of VET in Schools and community linkages, citing the example of partnerships in indigenous communities, and arguing that

*...the concept of social capital is highly relevant [to VET] ( ... ) The fundamental interdependence between social capital, human capital and economic and community well-being should be recognised (2004:iii).*

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### Summary and Conclusion

This review of literature on girls and young women, and their transitions from school to work, covers a selection of documents indicating a range of recent and current policy and research agendas for VET, schools, girls and young women, covering a period of approximately fifteen years, from the mid-1990s to 2004.

This review identified, within the literature, a number of major characteristics:

- a narrow research and policy agenda set within the current economically-driven climate of vocationalism in education, which prevails in Australia and internationally
- continued growth of VET in Schools and transition-to-work programmes
- a gender-neutral or gender-blind approach has subsumed the strong focus on girls' career and vocational needs, evident in the literature of the previous decade
- major funded research operates within the existing masculinist VET framework

From these major findings, a number of relevant topics were identified, of which four were chosen for further discussion, being considered particularly significant to an investigation of girls, school and VET.

- entrenched gendered social conditioning that affects the ways girls and young women approach their future career and life choices
- the current situation for women already in the workplace, that is far from satisfactory, and in which young girls are being expected to participate
- a current political agenda that diminishes the role of women and attempts to steer women and girls into traditional institutionalised roles
- the narrow research base informing VET and VET in schools, that promotes the current gender-blind focus and masculinist framework of vocational training.

The review concludes that the discussion of these issues provides only a partial and simplistic critique of the current situation for girls, merely suggesting the many complex ways in which girls understand and participate in their career choices. The interplay of factors such as poverty, class, indigeneity and culture produce a diversity of experiences. These factors all play roles in the area and degree of disadvantage faced by young women in post-compulsory education (Collins, Kenway & McLeod, 2000; Dwyer & Wyn, 2001).

This review found that research agendas in the area of VET in schools and transitions to work carry (in large part) assumptions that girls' gendered issues have been dealt with. The focal areas have shifted, leaving girls and young women very much out of focus. This 'clouding' of girls' issues within research has been documented, however, with some literature indicating that, for girls and young women, both the current models of transition education and school-linked VET, and the framework of paid work into which they expect and are expected to move, limit opportunities and operate to disadvantage them. The particular ways in which these factors continue to operate disadvantageously are not being adequately researched, however, due in large part to economically-driven education policies and agendas. Despite the emergence of recent studies which clearly identify the gendered nature of girls' and young women's VET-related disadvantages and their implications, gender-blind policy continues to drive the agenda of research into VET, VET in Schools and education and training pathways.

There is an urgent need for broad-based and independent research that investigates the factors that impact on girls' vocational futures, from the perspective of the participants: it is what young women experience, and what they identify as their concerns, needs and aspirations, that must be investigated and used to inform appropriate policies and strategies for girls, young women and VET.

This review of the literature found disturbingly little within the literature to suggest that opportunities and outcomes will improve for girls and young women in the near future. It is hoped, however, that this review, and the larger research project of which it forms a small part, will encourage and inform further investigation and debate in order to place back on the mainstream research agenda the VET-related concerns of girls and young women, and so their opportunities for secure economic futures.

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## Section 5. National Overview of Data



National Overview of Data

Robyn Woolley

Introduction

This report is based on questionnaire responses from cohorts of girls and young women enrolled in a VET course in schools or a TAFE Institute in South Australia, New South Wales and Queensland. It presents an overview analysis of the girls' perceptions of VET, its relevance to their future goals, their perceptions of structured work experience programs, and also how the girls talk about their future careers.

Who are the girls?

A total of 283 girls participated in this study. The participants for this research project were located in Brisbane and the Gold Coast in Queensland (99 girls), the northern suburbs of Sydney, NSW (109 girls), and suburban Adelaide, South Australia (75 girls). As shown in Figure 1 below, the majority of participants were aged 16 and 17.

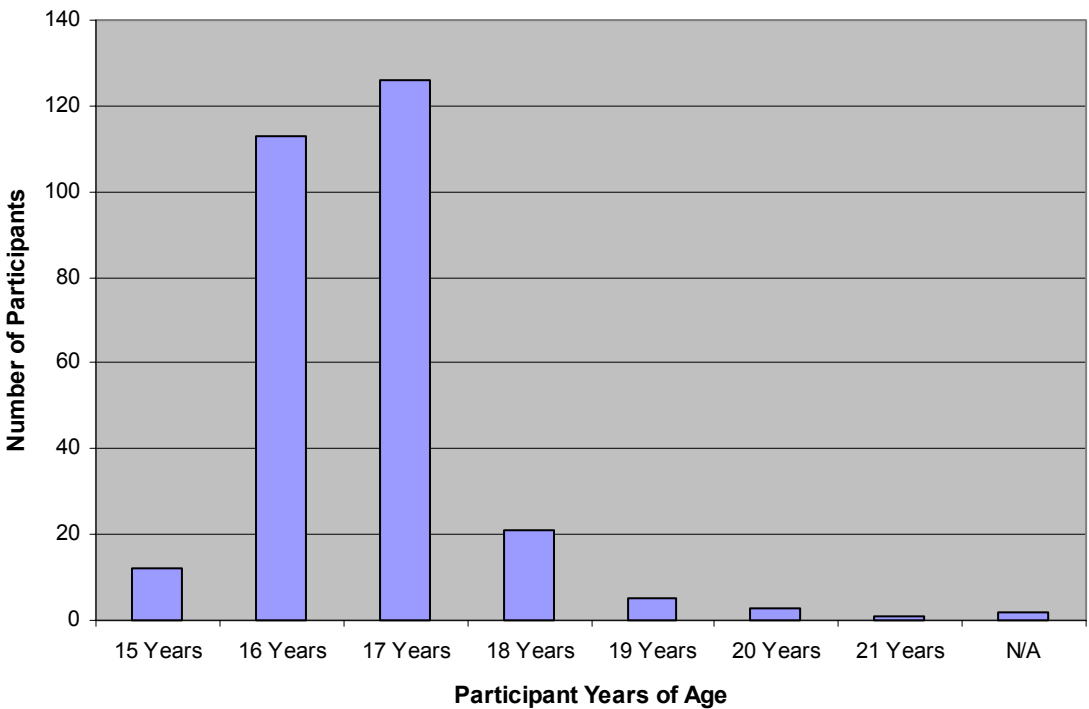
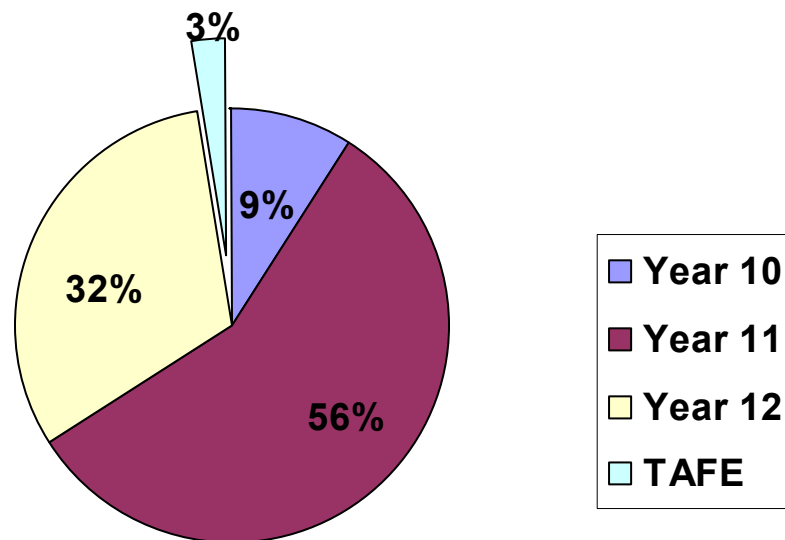


Figure 1. Age of Participants (NSW, QLD & SA)



## National Overview of Data

Similarly as seen in Figure 2 below, most participants were in Year 11 at school. South Australian data includes girls at school in Years 10, 11 and 12, and young women enrolled at TAFE, while girls in Years 11 and 12 are the source of data in Queensland and NSW. All were either undertaking VET study at school, or going to TAFE for their VET delivery at the time of data collection.



**Figure 2. Percent of Participants per Year of Schooling (NSW, QLD & SA)**

The majority of participants from the 3 states are Australian born with Northern Sydney displaying the widest cultural diversity in the student population. Among those who were not born in Australia, a broad representation of other nationalities is present, with students from China, Sri Lanka, Iran, New Zealand, Bangladesh, Afghanistan, Botswana, India, Brunei, Taiwan, America, Malaysia, Greece, Bosnia, South Korea, Hong Kong and Bahrain in the participant make-up. From this diverse representation, the majority of girls nominated English as the language spoken at home. Other languages spoken include Chinese, Persian, Armenian, Cantonese and Korean, Greek, Sri Lankan, Bengali, Tamil, Serbian, Arabic and Indonesian.

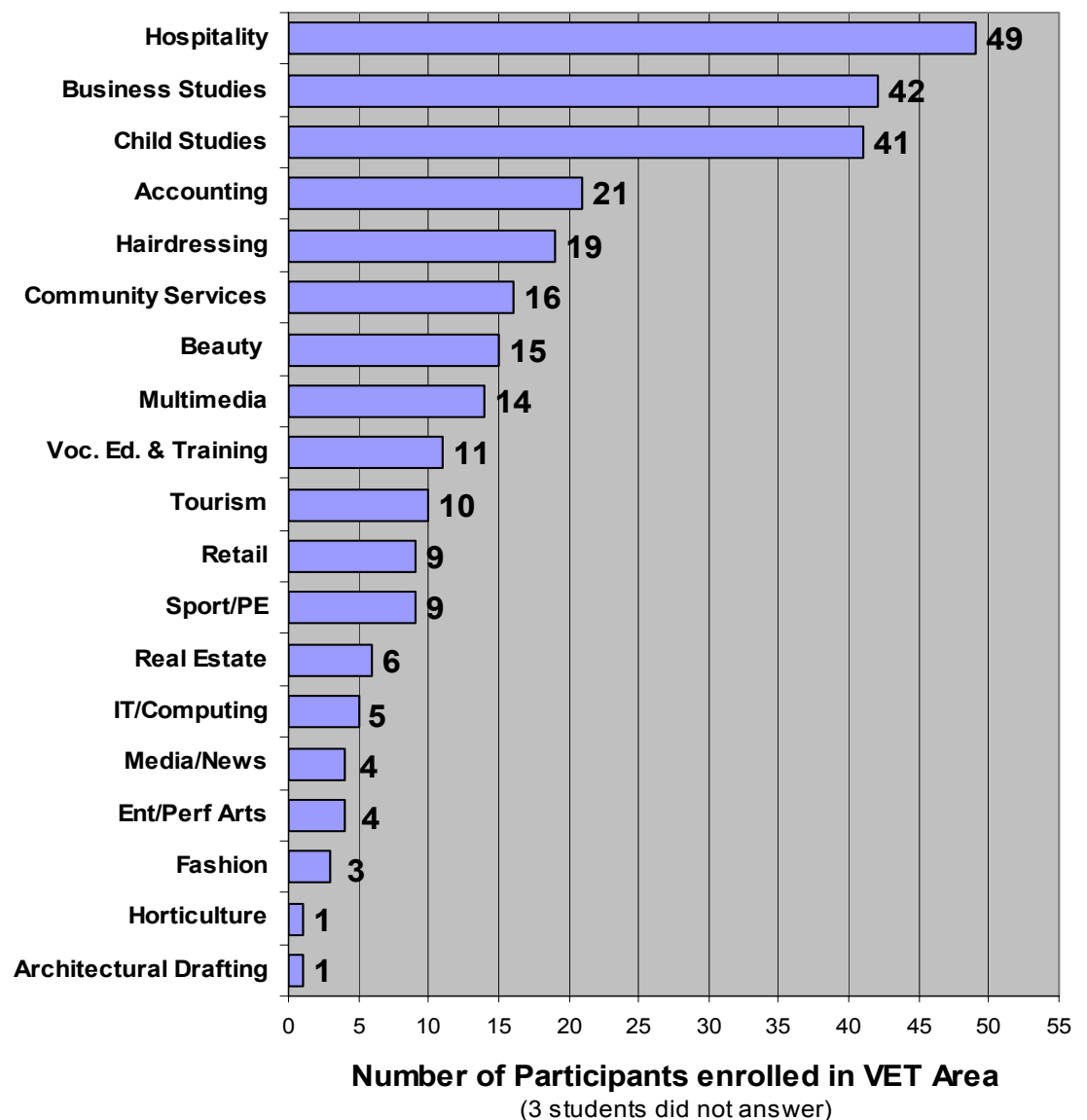
From the total number of participants in all states only 8 participants self-identified as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islanders.

Hearing, visual, intellectual, medical and learning difficulties were all specified among the 20 students from the 3 states who identified themselves as having a disability. Percentages of self-identified disability varied from 9.8% of the South Australian sample to 8.3% in the Queensland sample and 5.5% in NSW.

## National Overview of Data

The girls' employment histories are relevant to this survey. The majority of the girls in the 3 states were employed on a casual basis at the time of the research, with 72% of Queensland girls working and 60% in NSW and 53% in South Australia also engaged in various forms of paid work. Most of their employment was in retail and food service industries. Other forms of work included receptionist/secretarial, table waiting, hairdressing, swimming instruction, real estate agency and party hostess work.

The girls were enrolled in a wide selection of VET courses or subjects at the time of data collection. However, as illustrated in Figure 3 below, their enrolment is concentrated in 3 main areas. Hospitality, Business, and Child Studies subjects or courses account for almost half of the enrolments, followed by Accounting, Hairdressing, and Beauty. Other areas of VET study are listed in Figure 3 below.



**Figure 3. Participants Enrolled in VET Study Course Area  
(NSW, QLD & SA)**

## National Overview of Data

### Girls Future Working Lives and how they find out about work

*[I chose this]...because I like it. Year 11 Accounting TVET student*

*Money is hard to earn, easy to spend. Year 11 girl*

What girls like and what interests them is a great motivator to promote their learning about the world of work. VET subjects provide additional opportunities to both school organised work experience and engagement in casual employment, to learn more about possible career paths.

*Examples that link interest levels and the 'liking' of a subject can be demonstrated with a sample of answers from NSW. The majority who nominated childcare told us they 'loved children, and working with them'. Many said they 'were good at taking care of them' and 'liked to see children develop'.*

Some who had selected childcare found that this work-VET experience influenced them positively to see childcare as a career direction. TAFE and parents were also mentioned as helping them come to this decision.

NSW girls who identified the Beauty industry as a preferred career path chose this because it interests them, but also indicated that other students, friends and/or family had given them encouragement. 'Pampering myself and others', working with people, and the non-academic focus were mentioned here.

Dominating the surveys in all states were comments such as 'I like it', 'It's fun and enjoyable', 'I enjoy ...'.

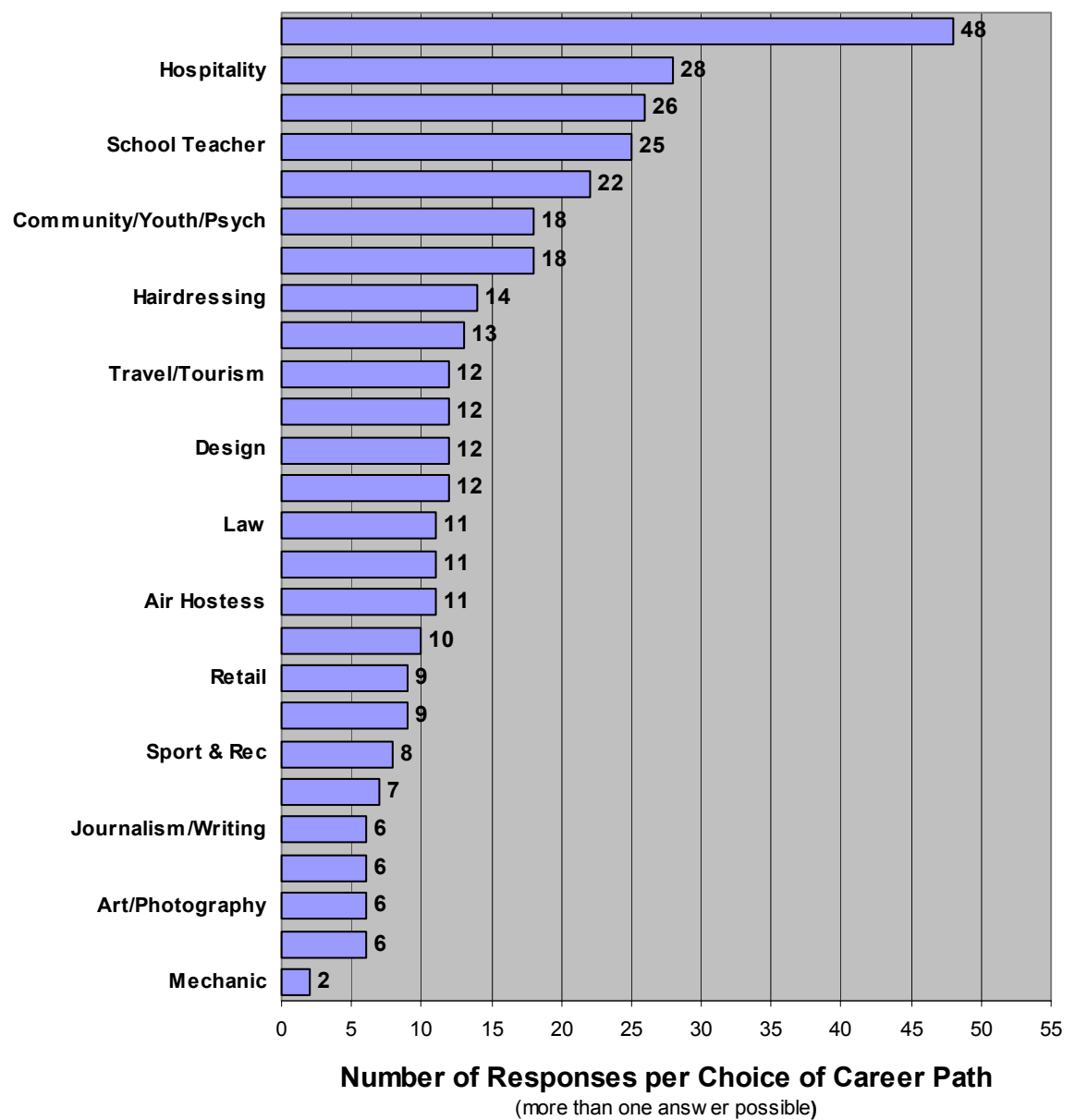
Beside the high levels of personal interest the girls nominated as a reason for identifying a career area for their futures, other motivators included: meeting people, the chosen occupation was recognised as having future potential, family pressures, they felt capable of doing it, and money.

In the main the future directions the girls see for themselves are those categorised as 'traditional' feminised areas of work. The majority of girls nominated hospitality, childcare, travel, beauty, teaching, business and hair-dressing as potential or even most likely career paths for their futures. Small numbers nominated real estate, law, accounting, welfare industry, health and sport, entertainment and performing arts, interior design, mechanic. Although there was a group of girls in the NSW sample undertaking IT, one only participant nominated this industry as a future career direction. When this lack in interest in IT was pursued in the focus groups not one participant in these groups indicated an intention to pursue study in IT.

However, South Australia showed a trend that included more non-traditional choices for future careers for girls and young women, including those of writer, scientist, security guard, animator, astrologer, architect, politics, and anthropologist.

## National Overview of Data

Future career choices that were nominated only once by any participant included: Anthropologist, Architect, Customs Officer, Florist, Astrologer, Politics, Security Guard, and raising a family. The remaining array of career choices can be seen in Figure 4 below.



**Figure 4. Participants' Future Career Path Choices  
(NSW, QLD & SA)**

## National Overview of Data

### Career Information

The majority of the girls informed us that they were familiar with the type of work involved in their career choice. These participants also identify their school Careers Advisors as their main source of information. Advice from friends also rates highly. It should be noted that 'girls' talk' is a significant source of information that is exchanged through girls' networks. Advice from parents, the media and the internet were other sources of information, with 'private course', 'TAFE', 'people who work in the business', teachers, 'open days at uni', and 'my work' also being acknowledged by participants.

When asked what things they would like to find out to help them decide on their future, the girls had many queries. Overwhelmingly, students wanted to know what was involved in the career they were interested in and how much money they could expect to make. They also especially wanted to know course details and the qualifications they needed.

Others were interested in how they could get into post school study pathways other than university; where they could go with the career; the location of study or work places; the marks they needed to get into university courses; the environment they would be working in; the cost of courses and how to gain work experience in the area. Also mentioned were the benefits of the job; related fields they could get into; the hours they would be working; opportunities; what they were best suited for; job market trends and an interest in having someone from the industry talk and share their experiences with them.

Almost all of the girls had access to a Careers Advisor at school, and over half of the girls said that their Careers Advisor helped them with general advice and guidance. Some were not sure whether the Careers Advisor had helped them, however, and a similar number stated they did not feel their Advisor helped them with their future career choices.

### Further Study

The confidence level in their stated career level remained high when asked of their future study plans with 88% percent in SA, 90% in NSW and 95% of the girls in Qld. stating that they intended to do more studies in their nominated career area. For these participants, university and TAFE were identified as next-step study paths. More girls in the SA sample indicated university was their desired study path than in Queensland or NSW.

### Work Experience

The majority of students [74% in SA, 76% in NSW and 84% in Qld] had undertaken work experience either as part of their TAFE or school courses. Of the students who had completed work experience hospitality, retail, child-care, hair and beauty, clerical/receptionist/secretarial work were identified as placement areas.

Reasons given by some students who had not undertaken work experience included that they had not yet had the opportunity, had not had the time, while others answered 'doing a course instead', 'organisation was too complicated', 'didn't get round to it', 'insurance expenses', 'don't want to', 'can't find anything suitable' and 'get into trouble so are not allowed to go'.

Nearly all students expressed their preferences for finding work experience placements on the basis of their own interest. Others stated that their work experience was organised by TAFE or school, family, or Careers Advisor, while some approached the workplace themselves, or chose it because it was easy to get to from their house.

When asked what they had learnt from the work experience, in all states over one third of students mentioned learning specific skills to the job they tried. Also rated highly was learning about the workplace and the industry in general. Other participants learnt skills in working with others and communicating in the workplace, and about customer service. Some respondents recognised that the job they tried was not the career they wanted, and a similar percentage felt they had learnt little, with a few comments indicating that 'work was hard', or that they were used as cheap labour.

## National Overview of Data

### Learning about work through the VET experience

#### Access to Information on the VET Course

Participants were asked about the information sources that informed their VET course selection. Schools and school Careers Advisors were found to be highly significant sources and filters of information for girls seeking VET course options. Students credit themselves with making their own decisions in selecting their VET course. However, some family influence can be attributed from comments indicating that girls discussed their decisions at home. Friends rated less highly here. Other influences were minor.

Parents are seen as highly valuable sources of information for South Australian girls but were rated less highly in NSW where friends were considered important an information source. A South Australian focus group discussion with a group of girls from one school showed that far from being forced by their parents into particular occupations, what the girls received from their family was in fact a constant source of motivation and encouragement and an interest in their daughters' futures. It is therefore important that parents be educated both in the range of jobs available and the associated training opportunities. This should include specific support for girls who want to pursue non-traditional career choices.

The majority of students were in the course of their choice and they stated that this was based on their interest and liking of the area, with more than two-thirds of students attracted to working in the industry of their VET course.

While it is pleasing to consider that girls were satisfied with their VET course selection and what they were gaining from it, it must be noted that there was little connection made between the 'value' of this field of study to the work place. Almost three quarters of students had no relevant information on the job availability in their VET course area. In a closer look at one state's figures (NSW), little more than one third of the students of the remaining students who did have relevant information, and chose to answer this question, said that their information came from their Careers Advisor or school. Some found information on the internet, and some received information from friends, people in the industry and brochures/handbooks. A few gained their information from family, TAFE and newspapers.

When asked how this lack of knowledge affected their decision to pursue a career in the area of their VET course, small numbers said it made their decisions difficult, but more than half in NSW up to almost three quarters of Queensland participants, saw this lack having no effect. One third of NSW students and one-fifth in Queensland said they had information on pay rates and salary ranges in the area of their VET course but the vast majority did not.

Below is a sample of responses from the girls:

*It does not affect me.*

*Pay is not that good, however if you enjoy your occupation it shouldn't matter.*

*I want to be financially stable and not knowing the pay is throwing me off making a final decision.*

*Has a great affect where I would not choose to pursue a career.*

Upon further examination of NSW data for one course area 'Hairdressing', the majority of respondents [59%] felt they had no information on job availability. Of the 8 students who stated whether or not this lack of information could affect this future career choice, 2 said they would 'have second thoughts', 3 mentioned that 'if the pay is good, it doesn't matter', 1 said it would have no effect.

A significant 86% of the students enrolled in a 'Beauty' course did not have information on job availability. Only 4 students said it did not affect them, 2 said it reduced their options, 2 had reduced interest in this career choice and 1 was more interested. In Accounting, 90% of participants enrolled had no information about job availability. Of the 4 IT students who answered this question 2 felt they knew about job availability and 2 did not.

Similar patterns can be discerned with the question on pay rates. In Hairdressing, only 47% answered this question and of those, 63% said they had no information on pay rates. In Beauty, only 4 students answered this question, 3 did not have information on pay rates and 1 did. From 7 students in Accounting, 4 did not have pay rate information and 3 did. In IT, the 2 students that answered the question did not know about pay rates.



## National Overview of Data

Current data from the *Australian Jobs Update: July 2004* indicates that many of the above areas do not, in fact, have very good job prospects for the end of this decade. The exception is hairdressing, which is listed as the only trade with 'very good prospects'. However, it is also noted that hairdressing has poorer earnings capacity compared to many other areas. Accounting and Information Technology are both identified as offering 'good prospects' for the end of the decade. The other fields of study selected by participants are classified as service jobs that generally involve high levels of casualised employment and low rates of pay.

Again using the *Average Weekly Earnings: Australia* data, only one of the above areas - real estate [property and business services] was identified as providing remuneration levels higher than average of the total workforce overall. Several such as Sport and Recreation, Beauty, Child Care were identified as cultural/recreational, health and personal care services that provide lower than average remuneration.

Referring back to the comments included from a small number of girls, the relevance of this information to them is (in their view) varied. However, we contend that such information is highly relevant for girls and young women to ensure they are fully cognisant of the immediate and longer term implications of their preference-based choices.

### Educational Aspirations, Future Career Path and Relevance of VET

Overall, two thirds of the respondents intend to continue study in their chosen VET area. A similar number of NSW respondents said they would follow their VET course into the industry area using the course as a career path while the numbers were slightly lower in Queensland. However, in South Australia slightly less than half of the participants said that they intend to continue study or to pursue a career in their chosen VET area.

Enjoyment or liking the course was a major motivator influencing future study and work plans for one quarter of the NSW student sample. Job and career opportunities were a motivating factor for a similar number of girls to continue study in their chosen VET area. The remaining third of participants do not wish to continue their VET studies, stating that *not* liking the course was their reason not to continue.

More than 90% of the girls in all three states felt the knowledge and/or skills they gained from the courses would be useful or relevant in the future, citing it as useful for career prospects, and for providing skills that will be useful for future work and for everyday life. The girls could also see benefits of their VET learning for their school and future study plans as they were already using the content, or felt it was giving them a head start for other study or for part time work.

*The course I'm completing is a basic skills one that I will need in everyday life as well as if I need a job in that area.*

The majority of students indicated that VET learning was more relevant than their school subjects stating that it supported their future goals:

*Very relevant my school subjects aren't relevant.*

*VET learning is better compared to subjects at school because VET is more hands on and VET is more relevant than school.*

*VET course is what I want to learn.*

*Extremely relevant, honestly I don't try as much as I do at TAFE because I know I need and want this.*

A closer examination of the grouped data reveals that in:

- Hairdressing, at least half of participants want to do further study in the area, about one third do not and the remainder is unsure.
- Accounting and Business Studies, at least three quarters want to do further study in the area and the rest do not.
- IT all students want to do further study, although not necessarily in IT.

When asked what they intended doing in the next 5 years, most participants thought they would be working and/or studying, with a few considering travel.

Asked if VET supported their goals less than one third of all participants said no or were unsure. This is a positive reflection on their VET learning experience as more than two thirds of all students believe that it will support them in attaining their future goals.

*I enjoy [the VET course] and think I could have some skills in it.*

*My choice, [I] want to get into real estate, [I] thought this would be a good starting point.*

*....my interest with the course and industry and wanting to get a head start in the industry while still at school.*

## National Overview of Data

### Summary

The participants in this study demonstrate confidence and positivity in linking their VET experiences to their future work and study plans. This strength is reinforced by their stated satisfaction in selecting study and career paths on the basis of enjoyment or personal preference - doing 'what they like'.

Work experience follows similar choice patterns to that of course selection, with personal interest being the main influence on choice for the majority of participants. Family and friends do exert some influence on choice patterns. Both casual employment experiences, and work experience provide opportunities to learn job specific skills, and learn about the workplace and working with others.

Of considerable importance is participants' high level of satisfaction with the VET study experience and with the valuable contributions that they believe it makes to their futures.

The high levels of intention to pursue the industry selected through the VET course area as a direction for future study indicates participants consider they are already making progress on their chosen career path.

Comments also indicate the potential for skills transferability from work experience, casual employment, school study and VET study for future study and work application.

The lack of information on job availability and pay rates of their chosen industry area is of utmost relevance. The majority of girls are uninformed about these matters. There is little demonstration that they have received any guidance about whether, or how, the industry area of personal interest could provide economic security. There is no evidence of any knowledge of the gendered implications inherent in field of study or work force patterns and how these could impact upon participants' futures.

Bearing in mind that the girls are demonstrating that they perceive themselves to be on a career path, there appears to be widespread failure to support them with critical information that should form a basis for decision-making for moving towards economically sustainable futures. There is no evidence of proactive use of employment forecasts or job growth data to inform girls' choices about future job availability. The girls appear to have no information relating to either the status of respective occupations, nor the financial implications of their choices.

Many girls participating in VET while at school are selecting industry areas where they are at risk of low remuneration, and casualised work that is associated with feminised occupations, especially those in the service industries. It appears from this case study that such knowledge is highly relevant for young women and may assist them to assess if career choices have the potential to provide them with the future lifestyles of their dreams.

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## Section 6. Getting Real



## Getting Real?

Elaine Butler

That girls and young women in each of the three states from which participants were drawn are actively engaging with ideas and experiences relating to their working futures; that they are enjoying work experiences, both actual through paid part time work and those associated with school-based vocational learning activities, augurs well for their futures. This is supported by the trend towards recognition that on-going education and training, post-school, will be necessary to support their endeavours. Already these girls are embodying ideals of lifelong learning. This motivation for pursuing careers is similar to that identified in Canadian research (e.g. ref. Fenwick, 2004), as is a recognition that as young women in the twenty first century, they will continue to carry most of the responsibilities around home and family.

What is of concern is the high potential for the existing (global/local) gendered inequalities to be perpetuated through the choices and 'pathways' that the majority of the girls are selecting. This trend will not enhance opportunities for the economic well-being for such girls. Whether these young women continue studies through VET, in workplaces or as students, or if they continue on to university study, seemingly entrenched gendered patterns of selection are being repeated, as ever (e.g. Jackson, 2003). The issue of 'getting real' illustrates the ambivalence inherent in the tension between exercising 'choices' and what Fenwick (2004, p. 179) describes as 'considerable confusion about their vocational role' and the '...contradictions embedded in the young women's narratives of experiences and vocational choice (p. 180). It also highlights the neglect inherent in a VET system where critical information is not made available to these girls and young women (as VET clients), and so, by default, is affirming their gendered choices.

The higher enrolment rates of women in university study is not enough to redress this issue, despite it being used as an example of why policy initiatives are no longer needed for girls (or women) in schools, VET or higher education. As argued by Alloway and Gilbert

*...(w)hile many young women look to university accreditation as a means of vocational preparation, the preparation they make still lies predominantly within the lower status, lower paid vocational areas...Consequently, despite higher female enrolments in higher education for several years now, we have not seen a corresponding increase in female earning capacity. (2003, p.108-9)*

This brings us to ask the question, posed in similar circumstances about similar cohorts and issues in Canada, by Fenwick:

*The important question here is, how is it that girls can enjoy higher overall educational achievement but have significantly lower economic achievement than boys? What happens or doesn't happen in girls' career and vocational education to address this disparity? (2004, p. 178. Our emphasis)*

Our data provide some illustrations of what happens. Those responsible for VET in schools are, perhaps unwittingly, complicit in the re-inscribing of gendered 'choices' for girls into feminised areas of work, rarely providing critical information about the implications of gendered decisions: low pay, predominantly part-time and/or highly casualised work areas, with limited career paths. That girls 'enjoy' such work, are 'good at it' is of course proffered as very strong motivation for selecting such areas. What is masked here also however, are the heavily gendered discursive realities that shape girls identities, and so their subjectivities.

VET has a masculinist history that is now well documented and recognised (e.g. Butler and Ferrier, 2000). This history has run parallel to the development of compulsory schooling, as has the legislation for and policy-making in VET. What is happening now is the blurring of two previously separate sectors of education, with unproblematic policy transference, most often not heeding any of the debates that have been framed in the name of 'equity', especially in relation to women. While research and associated policy activism in relation to women in the VET sector is well recorded, response has been reluctant, patchy and is now in retreat.

This has exacerbated by the policy deficit that exists nationally for VET in Schools, where there is a range of differing state-based parameters and practices that are far from consistent, especially in the area of equity initiatives. It is further exasperated by the lack of national data relating to VET activities in schools, including disaggregation of such data by gender which is a minimum requirement.

## Getting Real?

Australia is now entering yet another period of rapid change in the national VET system (e.g. DEST, 2005a; MCEETYA, 2005). Within these changes, it is now evident that focus is turning (back) to masculine trade areas, to fill highly publicised 'skills shortages' (DEST, 2005b). VET and VET in schools continue as a priority area, and will evolve rapidly. There has been negligible success of a plethora of initiatives to attract and retain girls in 'non-traditional' occupations (and apprenticeships) for the last two decades and longer, both in Australia and other Anglophone countries. Lack of a critical mass of girls and the entrenched masculinist cultures in 'non traditional industries and workplaces' are still issues that require attention and urgent action.

We argue that appropriate complementary national and state/local policy initiatives and resources to investigate and support girls and young women in their engagement with VET in schools and ensuing career paths is a matter of high priority. Examples of innovative practice in this area include programs such as the GirlSavvy and Lucy Mentoring that were conducted in New South Wales (OFW, 2004).

Such initiatives must engage with the realities and future projections of young women's lives, within the socio- cultural, economic and political contexts that shape their lives. Moreover, it is essential that in the framing of such initiatives, critical cognisance of historical global/local gendered inequalities that continue to be reproduced must be addressed. This is doubly important, given the push for girls and young women to make choices around occupations and careers at ever earlier ages without understanding the implications of such choices in relation to their future economic well-being.

Some guidelines for such work are already available, internationally as well as in Australia. For example, the UK Working Party (2004) recognises that:

*Gender and ethnic stereotyping has been a major unintended feature of the take-up of many vocational programs and options. Efforts to counteract its effects have had only mixed success. With stereotyped attitudes already well- established ..., the uptake of Year 10 work experience placements is highly gender stereotypical and, instead of broadening pupils' horizons, the perception of the adult workplace are frequently reinforced by work experience practice.*

*...Stereotyping helps to exacerbate sector skill shortages. Care must be taken not to perpetuate these perverse outcomes within the new framework (p. 83).*

We can learn from Antrobus (2004, p 133-135) who, after reviewing many years of gender equity work for women, advises that strategies that most often result in success include those that combine global/local information and networks; are cross sectoral; use multiple strategies; are based on appropriate participative and gender-sensitive research methodologies, and that advocacy be informed by careful analyses of power.

From a Canadian perspective, Fenwick (2004, p.169) posits four directions for change:

- more gender sensitive career education for girls;
- sponsored vocational education for women;
- management education in gendered issues arising in the changing economy; and
- critical vocational education in both schools and workplaces.

These initiatives mirror those identified as necessary from the data presented in this report. However, there is a need to go further, to redress structural and systemic issues. In the making of VET policy, it has long been presented as a 'fact' that VET has no jurisdiction to influence or advocate for changes needed to make VET more 'women-friendly' (e.g. Quay Connection, 2003), as many issues are associated with the labour market, industries, employers, workplaces and organisations- the 'wider society'. On the contrary, we argue that this negotiation and advocacy is a central responsibility for VET, and especially for VET in schools.

Given the privileged positioning that is ascribed to 'industry', 'business' and employers in VET policy making and delivery, and the close associations between education and employment at national and state government levels, VET is in a pivotal position to champion proactive and responsible initiatives that will benefit young women (and girls) as well as boys and men.



## Getting Real?

Similarly, responsibility rests with the organisations and the educators who deliver VET in schools programs, and especially with career counsellors. This requires a critical awareness of gendered dispositions, and the impact of such outcomes on the daily lives and futures of the young women over whom they have such influence. Some actions would appear relatively straightforward to put in place. For example, and as confirmed by Quay Connection (2003, pp 44, 54), the range of VET offerings in schools is narrow, with girls most often being directed to female dominated occupations for VET study and work experience. VET in schools subject choice is most often determined by VET coordinators and influenced by parents and career coordinators who may have outdated perceptions of VET. Gender distribution of teaching staff in schools tends to replicate the gendered nature of the respective industries and occupations, reinforcing stereotypes. The widening of VET course availability through schools, professional development for career counsellors to enhance their knowledge of gendered issues in the economy and the labour force, and school based seminars for parents assisting their daughters in this period of critical choice should not be difficult to implement.

In other areas, change may be more long term, and not so straight forward. As Alloway and Gilbert advise:

*...to effect long term change it would be necessary to identify the kinds of discursive practices that circulate through everyday talk to produce and maintain gender as difference. It would be necessary also to make visible young men's and young women's locatedness within, and commitment to, those discourses. And it would be necessary to recognize how desire itself is deeply implicated in young men's and young women's selection of postschool options and the career pathways that those choices provide (2004, p. 110).*

However, that such change cannot be affected 'instantly' is no reason to avoid policy development and strategies to redress both short-term and long-term issues that (continue to) impact on young people, and, we argue, especially girls and young women. Rather than engage in gender wars, it is time to balance the current obsession with issues of masculinity, boys and men; it is time to stop clouding and masking issues for girls and young women. We have more knowledge now about gender dynamics, the construction of gender and gendered identities, and how these are performed individually, socially, politically and economically, in every day life, than ever before. An ever-increasing range of relevant research methodologies and effective gender-based strategies is available. The global/local pool of expertise relating to gender and women is easily accessible. The question can be put: why are such resources not being utilised.

This research project, although described as small-scale, resonates strongly with issues that are much wider, for the economic well-being of young women. It is now urgent that wider and deeper gender-sensitive research be conducted in this area. It is time that girls and young women are freed from the jail of 'generic youth'. We argue that girls and young women should be active recipients of policy making and implementation that support them. Rather than being the recipients of policy and practices that position young women in scenarios of contradictions and ambivalence relating to their vocational futures VET in Schools must assist them in their ambitions to 'get real'. What is needed are policies and practices that support girls and young women to fulfill their dreams:

*Finishing school isn't just about the studying, it's about learning and experiences in whatever you want, to fulfill a dream. VET can help you do that. (Mapedzahama- South Australian Report 2005. Appendix A)*



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